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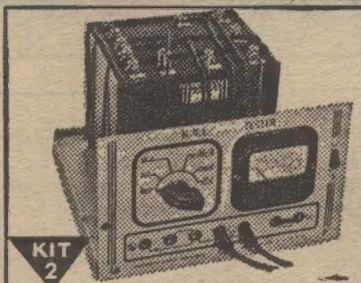


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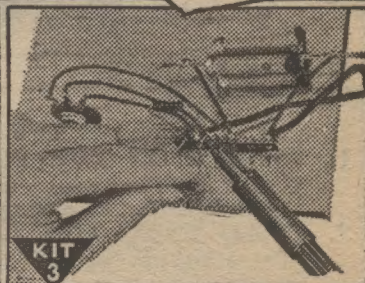
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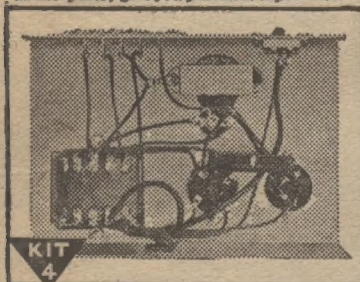
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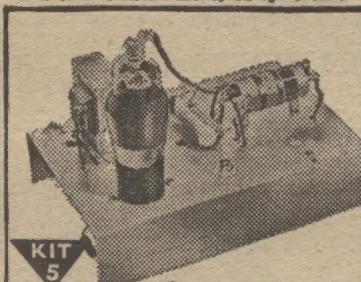
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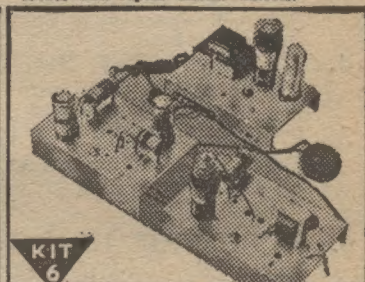
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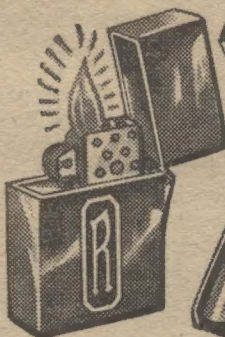
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● ON THE TRAIL ●



THE betting along whiskey row in Caldwell, Kansas, that evening in 1880 was five to one, ten to one and twenty to one that Marshal Bat Carr's new deputy would be planted in boothill by morning. Either that or he would be cutting the breeze for the brush. Nobody was betting on the deputy.

A lawman's badge was just a target to the tough wild bunch that ran rough-shod over Caldwell. The only reason Bat Carr lived to drink his wages was that he let the gunslingers do what they chose and hired deputies to stand between him and the flying lead.

The bushwhack trap the owlhooters had set in the Texas House that night was their first in several weeks. Nobody had wanted to take on the deputy's job until that afternoon when the tall, rangy stranger walked in.

Squeaky-voiced Carr was at his ease, enjoying a drink with his cronies. He didn't waste a glance at the stranger who leaned a Winchester against the bar and tossed down a snort of bourbon.

"Where'll I find th' marshal?" the stranger asked the bartender.

Carr turned, looked into a pair of pale blue eyes set in a lean face, sun-tanned to the bone, and said, "I'm the marshal. Name's Carr."

"I'm Hendry Brown," the stranger said. "I hear you need a deputy. I'll take th' job."

"Well, I don't know," Carr said dubiously. He turned and winked at his companions, who were grinning openly. "We bury a deputy a week in this town, friend."

"That's what I heard," Brown replied calmly. "Do I get th' job?"

"It's your funeral," Carr said. "But if you want it, you can start tonight."

"Suits me," Brown said. "I'll be around about six this evening."

Rough, boisterous laughter followed Hendry Brown through the batwing doors and the plan to burn him down was laid before he'd stabled his horse in the livery.

PROMPTLY at six, Brown walked to the Texas House, two heavy six-shooters hanging at his hips. The gang was waiting, spread out in the bar. As Brown approached, one of them put on a wild drunk act, yelling and firing his Colt.

Hendry Brown shouldered through the doors and stepped quickly to one side with his back to a wall. His chill blue eyes swept the room, saw two gunmen with ready hands on their pistol butts, and Brown's hands slapped leather.

When the roar of his Colt's stopped, the gunmen were dead on the sawdust-sprinkled floor. Brown stalked to the drunken man who was the "bait" of the trap, cracked his head with the barrel of a six-gun and dragged him to the jug.

"Gawd," breathed a man, his voice dazed and incredulous. "Who th' hell is this Hendry Brown?"

It was a question Sheriff Pat Garrett of Lincoln County, New Mexico could have answered. He knew Hendry Brown only too well as a mescal-drinking, monte-playing, pistol-shooting sidekick of Billy the Kid.

But if the mayor, city council and law-abiding citizens of Caldwell thought that in Hendry Brown they had found a protector, they were soon to be disillusioned. Brown

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

tamed Caldwell, but despite the badge on his chest, the only law he upheld was that he carried in his holsters.

While the saloons and honkytonks still buzzed over the sudden death dealt by Brown in the Texas House, a traveling minstrel show came to Caldwell. Before performing, the minstrels were to parade down Main Street, each wearing a suitable high silk hat. The wild bunch whooped for joy. What better targets could a man ask?

The mayor shuddered at the thought of all that lead flying around the valuable store properties of Caldwell. When he explained the situation to the manager of the show, the latter gladly consented to stop the parade.

But Hendry Brown didn't see it that way. Brushing the mayor aside, he told the manager, "Tell yore band to start playing and start marchin'. A lot of folks have turned out for yore show, an' I'm not goin' to disappoint them."

Mopping his brow with a shaky hand, the manager agreed. As soon as the procession started, Hendry Brown quickly wormed his way through the crowd until he was standing near Sandy Jim, a tinhorn gambler reputed to be quite a shot.

At sight of the first silk hat, Sandy Jim drew his gun and fired. The hat went into the dust, but instead of trying another target, Sandy Jim suddenly started prancing in the street himself.

Hendry Brown had fired a slug between Jim's feet and tersely commanded, "Dance!" Sandy Jim danced.

"Harder," said Brown.

Sweat streaked down Sandy Jim's face and his legs flew. Hendry Brown wasn't pleased. "You dance like an old cow," he told Sandy Jim. "Show us how you can run."

Sandy Jim started running. Hendry Brown's six-gun roared and the gambler sprawled dead in the street. Brown's menacing gun muzzle covered the rest of the wild bunch.

"That'll show you hombres," he said, "that I'm the only gent in this town that can shoot guns in public."

After Sandy Jim was buried the next day, numerous Caldwell residents flatly told Marshal Bat Carr that he'd better fire his deputy. Inwardly shaking, Bat Carr located Hendry Brown. Brown was busily cleaning his six-shooters, but he gave Carr a nod in greeting. "Hendry," Carr said, nervously eying the shining guns.

"What?" asked Brown.

Bat Carr gulped, then said, "You're fired."

"Uh-uh," Brown disagreed, shaking his head. "You are. I've decided to take yore job."

Reaching across the table, Brown jerked off

the marshal's star and pinned it on his own vest.

"Any objections?"

Again Carr gulped. "No."

MARSHAL BROWN'S first move was to hire as his deputy an old friend from New Mexico, one Ben Wheeler, a gun-slinger who proved as truculent as his boss.

From then on, instead of being terrorized by the wild bunch, Caldwell lived in dread of Hendry Brown and Ben Wheeler. Through fear of Brown and Wheeler, other badmen restrained their trigger fingers in town.

But there was no such check-rein on the new marshal and his deputy. On a drunken spree, Hendry Brown shot and killed a friendly Ponca Indian, Spotted Tail.

Caldwell was thoroughly cowed. So much so, indeed, that when the mayor and city council met to discuss ways and means of getting rid of Marshal Brown and Deputy Wheeler, not a hand was raised when the worthies walked in.

Instead, the council passed a resolution of confidence in Marshal Brown—at his own suggestion—and presented him with a gold-plated Winchester rifle.

The one sunny Kansas day, Brown and Wheeler found themselves temporarily short of ready cash. Mounting their horses, they rode from Caldwell, ostensibly on the trail of some outlaws.

They did pick up two men, an unknown cowboy and an owlhoot named Smith. Riding on to Medicine Lodge, a small cowtown, the quartette halted before the bank.

Brown, still wearing his marshal's badge, Wheeler and Smith walked into the bank while the cowboy held their horses.

"Reach!" Brown commanded the cashier over his leveled six-shooters. "An' fork over all the dinero you got."

The cashier dodged to one side, hand streaking for his own Colt. Before he could touch it, Brown fired and mortally wounded the man. But the dying cashier dragged himself to the safe and closed it.

The bank's president came running and was killed by Smith. Without a penny in their pockets, Brown and his compadres rode hard out of Medicine Lodge with a posse forming behind them.

Hendry Brown's luck had run out. Led by Barney O'Connor, the posse jumped Brown and his men early the next day while they were camped in Cedar Canon. After a bloodless struggle, the gun-slingers were captured, led back to Medicine Lodge and hanged as soon as they got there.

Barney O'Connor kept the gold-plated Winchester as a souvenir.

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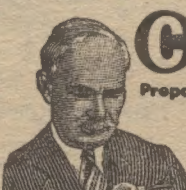
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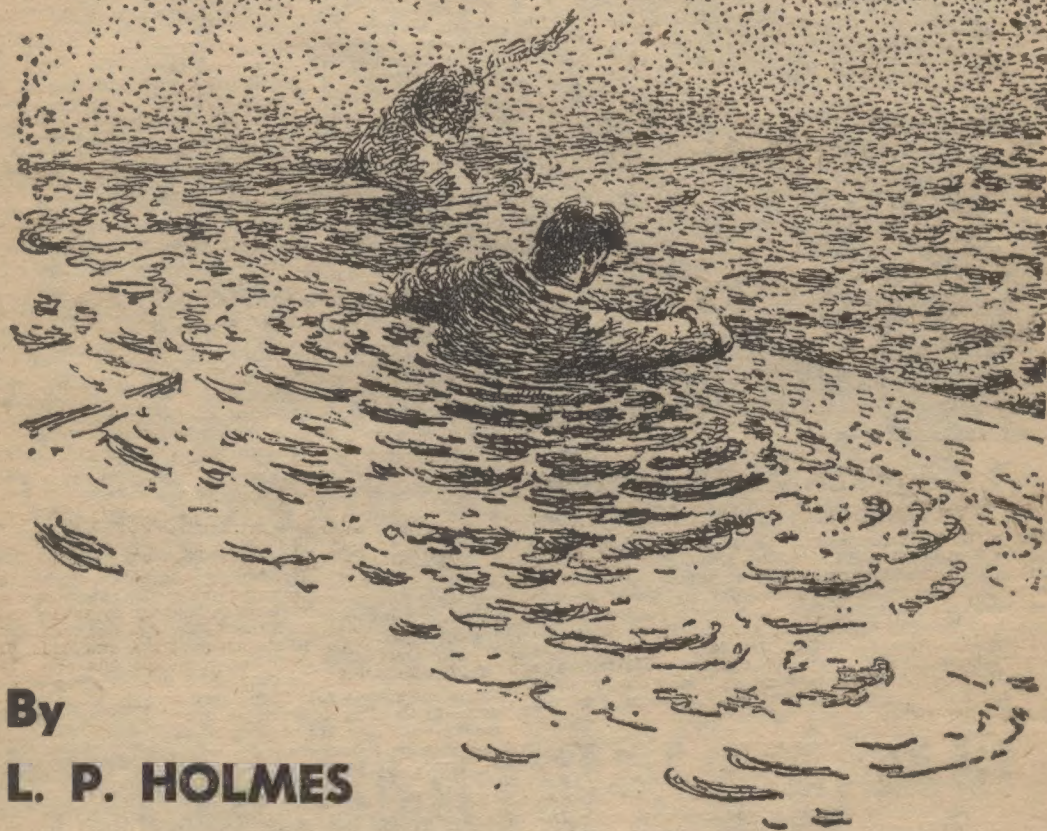
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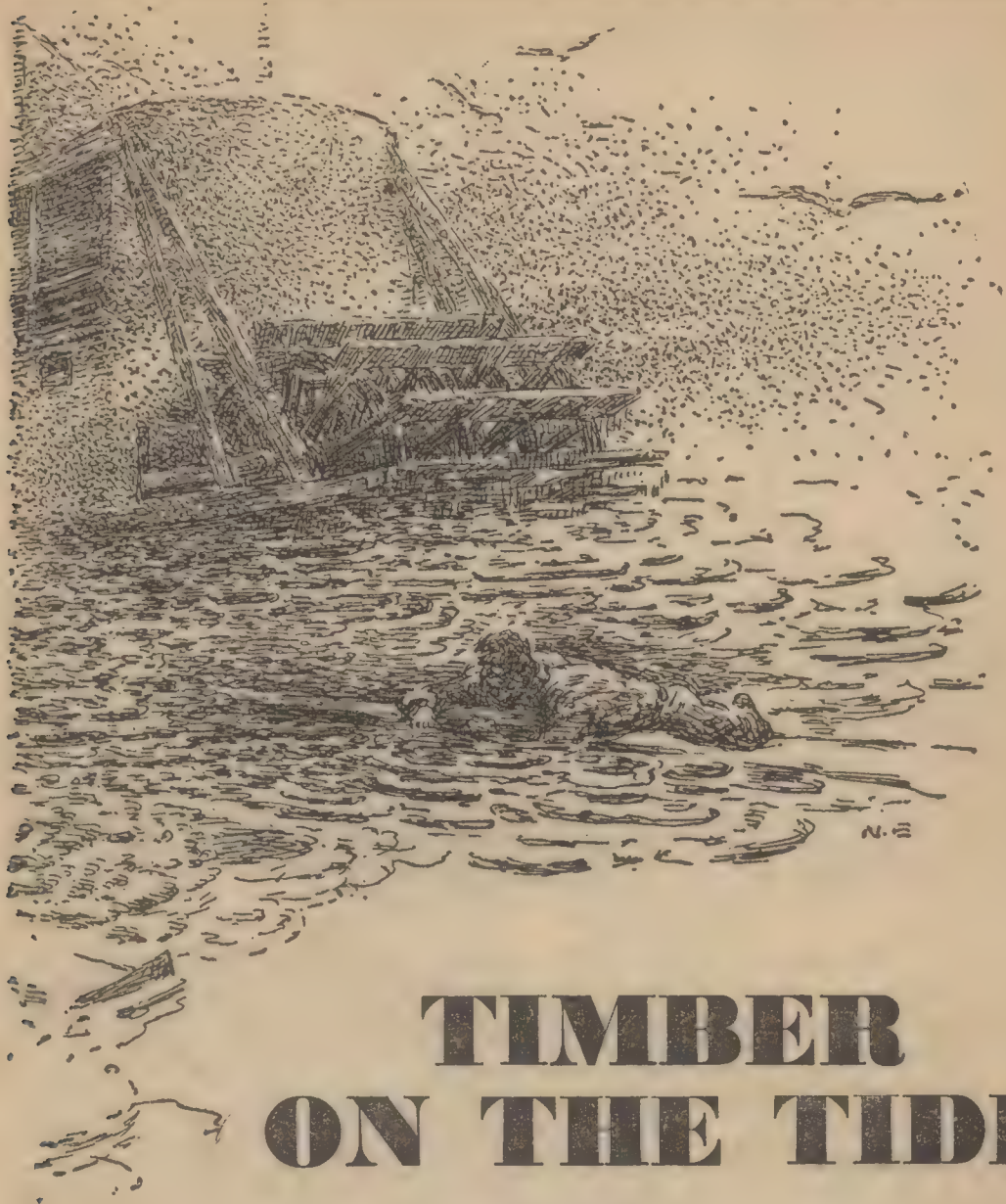


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By
L. P. HOLMES

*Gold or death was waiting at the end of that
bullet-swept trail—as big Dan Mowbry made
his last desperate play for black river riches
—or boothill!*



TIMBER ON THE TIDE

CHAPTER ONE

Fury In The Fog

ALL the way through the long swing across the southern reaches of Saint Paul, or, as the Spanish had it, San Pablo Bay, the smell of fog had been growing stronger, of fog and of mud flats, for from the upper surge of Carquinez Straits and Suisun Bay beyond, they had been riding the ebb. Now, as they turned south, beating through the narrows and into the head of San Francisco Bay proper, the tide was on the turn and Pacific Ocean waters stormed in through

the Golden Gate, bringing with them the fog, not merely the breath of it.

It was like a resistless tide itself, that fog. It flowed, as did the waters. It poured through the Gate, swirled about the flanks of the guarding points, billowed up and slithered across the hills beyond the city. It drowned the westering sun and hastened an early twilight. And it swept over and engulfed the little stern-wheeler river steamer, *Vixen*, with her tow of two hundred thousand board feet of rafted pine lumber, from the mill of Peter Jensen, from the distant river town of Sacramento.

Up in the pilot house of the *Vixen*, Captain Ezekiel Blood strained his eyes into the gray-white smother, cursed softly and jangled his engine room bell, calling for half speed. It was, he knew, going to be a ticklish task, feeling his way from here on in to a safe anchorage in South Bay, with that clumsy lumber raft tow out astern.

Back on the raft itself, Dan Mowbry had the feeling of being abruptly transported into another world, as the fog closed down. A ghostly world, full of clammy, dripping vapors, which held the smell of salt and ocean distances in them; which drowned a man's vision and dulled all sound.

Standing up at the front end of the lumber raft, Dan caught the slowing beat of the *Vixen's* wheel, and nodded. A good man, Captain Zeke Blood, river and bay wise, who knew that there was a time for daring and a time for caution, with right now the time for the latter. Under Mowbry's feet, as though sensing the restless swell of the ocean beyond the Golden Gate, the raft creaked and complained, but Mowbry felt no fear for it, for it was strongly cribbed and soundly lashed, with plenty of new manila hawser. Lifting beside him, curving up into the mist, was the huge towing hawser, the other end of it lashed to the *Vixen's* hog post. The wash from the *Vixen's* wheel, crested with muddy foam, slapped and muttered against the raft's blunt end.

The touch of the fog was chill and Dan Mowbry hunched his chin a little deeper into the collar of his ragged old coat, got out his pipe, loaded and lighted it. Standing there, feet slightly spread, he made a tall, strong figure, narrow of waist and broad of shoulder. His features were boldly, but bluntly carved, his eyes a clear, searching blue, his square jaw dark with a week of unshaven whiskers. There was maturity in him, but there were also the adventurous fires of youth, which called for movement and action and a view of far horizons.

It was, he mused, little more than a year ago that he had stood on a wangan raft floating down the Penobscot River in far off Maine. Up until that time the procurement of white pine timber in all its phases, logging, driving,

milling, had filled his whole world. Then, from the land of the sunset, out across endless plain and desert and high mountain range, came the magic word—gold! And it did to Dan Mowbry what it did to so many thousands of others with the heaven and hell of youth in them; it turned his eyes and his dreams to the West.

For many thousands the trail to the land of gold was the one across the plains and the deserts and the mountains. For many thousands more it was by ship to Chagres, then across the slimy, pestilential jungle of the Isthmus to Panama, then by ship again, north to San Francisco, the sprawling, roaring, gold-mad infant by the Golden Gate. And because the white water of log-choked rivers was in his blood, Dan Mowbry had taken this water trail to the land of adventure and riches.

THERE was little about that trip which Dan Mowbry cared to remember, except the girl. He had seen her first on the ship that carried them to Chagres, and she was like no other woman he had ever seen before. Slim and gallant and gay, clinging to the rail, the wind whipping her cloak about her, laughing into the very teeth of the spume-laden gale that had hammered the ship off Cape Hatteras, the gale that had frightened most of the passenger list half out of their senses. But not her. She was proud, she was fearless, she was altogether wonderful and the feeling she had awakened in Dan Mowbry was as much a respectful awe as anything else.

He had lost trace of her at Chagres, but just short of Panama had come up with her again, her party stranded in the jungle, deserted by treacherous native guides and porters. Fever, sickness, even death had touched the girl's party, but the girl herself, though worn and pallid from exposure and hardship, still had that gay and flaming spirit.

It had taken almost gruffness on Dan Mowbry's part to get her to take his place on the back of the stunted, shaggy little mule he had been riding, while he marched along beside her, still using gruffness as a shield to hide his awe and admiration for her.

It seemed he could see her yet, riding there beside him, her head high, her soft little chin up-tilted, her gray eyes clear and unafraid, tendrils of her hair silken soft and shining where they escaped the confines of the mantilla bound about her head.

And so they had finished the last of the trail into Panama. For those few miles she had somehow seemed very close to Dan Mowbry, but once at Panama and aboard another ship, bound north for the Golden Gate, a great distance settled between them again. His final glimpse of her had been when she stepped from the ship's small boat on to the muddy

beach at San Francisco and into the waiting arms of a tall, sharp-featured man with iron gray hair and mustache. But when this man lifted her into the waiting carriage nearby, she had turned, looked back at other travelers debarking from the small boat and smiled squarely into Dan Mowbry's eyes. That smile he had to remember her by, that smile, and her name.

Elsbeth Warren.

Well, a lot of things had happened since then. For one, Dan Mowbry had found that he was not cut out to be a miner. He had learned this the hard way, back in the high, lonely, foaming gulches of the Sierras, where the few found fortune and the many only disappointment and hardship and failure. Dan Mowbry had been one of the many. Back in Sacramento from the foothills, with only a meager couple of ounces in his poke, he had smelled fresh pine sawdust on the breeze and a great nostalgia for his former trade had gripped him. He had followed that scent to the mill and yards of Peter Jensen, where, as a man with experience he had been eagerly seized upon and put in charge of this lumber raft, destined for the booming, roaring, frantically expanding new mecca of men's dreams—San Francisco. Here the demand for lumber of all kinds was insatiable, the need far ahead of supply, the prices dazzling.

A faint hail came down to him above the slowing beat of the *Vixen's* wheel. There was a thin creaking and a pulley came sliding down the slant of the towing hawser. On the hook of the pulley was a blackened can of coffee, hot and steaming. Dan turned and called along the raft and his two helpers came up, dim shadows through the fog. They took turns drinking and the hot, strong beverage warmed them, cut the fog from their throats.

"That Kanaka cook on the *Vixen* is as white a man as any of us," growled Joe Hannibal. "He knows what a man needs to keep this damned water out of his bones."

Sam Grainer, about to drink, paused with the can almost at his lips, his head swinging slightly as he peered into the thick air to starboard. "Boat out there," he murmured. "Hear them oars?"

Even as Sam spoke, Dan Mowbry saw the boat, the craft coming up out of the fog with ghostly suddenness, a large gig, with nearly a dozen men in it. Not until it slithered alongside the raft and the men came charging out of it, did the full import of it all strike Dan Mowbry, for some of those men carried axes. The others came leaping across the raft, straight at Dan and his two helpers, who, the next moment were fighting for their lives.

A burly, long armed man led the attackers and he aimed a powerful, swinging blow at Dan Mowbry's face. Instinctively Dan ducked, felt the fellow's knotted knuckles graze his

head, then smashed out two savage punches of his own, one to the body, the other to the jaw. Both landed and the burly one stopped in his tracks, staggered back. Dan leaped in to follow up his advantage, but a vicious smash from a second attacker, catching him from the side, landed just under his ear, numbing and half stunning him. They were all over him then, smashing him back and down—where they used fists, knees, boots.

Dimly Dan heard curses and snarls where Joe Hannibal and Sam Grainer were taking the same beating he was, by the same kind of odds. Also, he heard the thock of hard-swung axes and the snap of manila hawsers, cut and parting under strain. Underneath him the raft seemed to settle and spread. Water spurted up through widening intervals between planks. A yell lifted.

"Get back to the boat! The raft's breaking up—get back to the boat!"

A final blow, a final kick and Dan's attackers left him, charging back to their boat. Dan struggled up, bleak with a cold, killing fury. He was physically sick, for he had taken a thunderous amount of punishment in those few brief moments, yet such was the rage within him, it lifted him and drove him at the last of the pirate crew racing for the boat.

The fellow had an axe and he threw it at Dan, but it went over Dan's shoulder and into the water beside the disintegrating raft. Dan caught one glimpse of the fellow's face, thin, snarling and darkly handsome before his hurtling fist blotted it out. The blow knocked the fellow clear off the raft, to splash into the water beside the gig. Then the end of a swung oar caught Dan in the chest, knocking him to his knees. As the gig backed swiftly away, Dan saw its occupants hauling the limp victim of his last punch out of the bay waters and over the gunwale. A moment later the gig had vanished in the fog.

Two dim figures came staggering across the shifting lumber to Dan. Joe Hannibal and Sam Grainer, bloody, bruised and wild with anger. Just as they reached him the raft seemed to shrug itself apart and all three of them were in the water, clinging to the nearest plank for support.

THE tide-riven bay waters were chill and hungry, the fog a gray and clammy shroud under which to die. And despite the fact that two others were close at hand and in the same predicament as himself, Dan Mowbry had never felt more lonely and helpless in his life.

Somewhere a boat-horn rumbled, two short, hoarse notes, staccato, indicative of alarm. And the fading thump of the *Vixen's* wheel ceased altogether. A shout came, thin and anxious. Dan spat out a mouthful of bay wa-

ter and shouted back. The beat of the *Vixen's* wheel began again, moved completely out of all hearing. Then, after a long period of anxiousness, it came back into being again, starting, stopping, but always coming closer.

Dan yelled again and got an answer, and the thump of the paddle wheel grew stronger and stronger. Then, pushing slowly through the fog above them came the blunt and homely bow of the little river boat. Again Dan yelled and a relieved answer came down. Ropes splashed in the water beside them and a few moments later, chilled and dripping but thankful, Dan and Joe Hannibal and Sam Grainer were safe aboard the *Vixen* and being hustled into Cap'n Zeke Blood's little cabin where they were stripped, wrapped in blankets and given huge mugs of scalding coffee to drink.

Cap'n Zeke was apologetic. "Sorry I couldn't have got you out quicker, boys. But what with the fog and having to take it plenty slow, so's not to smash the buckets off my wheel on all that floating lumber, and having to stop engines entirely every now and then to locate you by your yells, I couldn't do much better. Here, let me spike that coffee with some more of this whiskey. That'll drive out the chill."

Between gulps, Dan Mowbry said, "You got us out, Cap'n Zeke. That's the main thing. Those damned pirates—I can't figure that deal. Why should they want to break up the raft? Who are they? What have they got against us?"

"Bolivar Tyson," said Cap'n Zeke. "He just don't aim to have any competition in the lumber market in that building-crazy city yonder. Hundred dollars a thousand board feet for sawed lumber is nothin'. Tyson's got a fleet of schooners bringing his lumber in from the redwood country up the coast. He's got a richer gold mine than any ever dug back in the hills, and he knows it. He aims to keep it that way, even if he does have to turn his pug-uglies loose on the little fellers like Pete Jensen. This is the second raft I've tried to bring down for Pete Jensen and the second time Tyson has busted it up. I'm beginning to get riled at that swab. I am, for a fact."

Cap'n Zeke Blood was a stocky little man, with sun- and wind-squinted eyes, shaggy brows and a skin stained by exposure to the tint of old mahogany. Now a hard gleam settled in his eyes and the black, stubby pipe he was puffing on tilted at a combative angle.

"I was supposed to guard that raft and I didn't make much of a job of it," said Dan Mowbry grimly. "Think there's any chance of salvaging much of that lumber, Cap'n Zeke?"

Captain Zeke shook his head. "Not for us, lad. What with this fog and evening coming on now, we couldn't do a lick of good. By morning the tide will have scattered the lum-

ber all over South Bay. But Tyson will salvage it. He's got three or four steam tugs and a whole fleet of small boats. He'll have his men out foraging by daylight tomorrow. And we ain't got the small boats or the men. But don't you go to feeling too bad about it. You and these other boys did your best. You put up the best fight you knew how against odds. Pete Jensen is going to scream, of course. But he knew to begin with that he was playing a gamble. He knows Bolivar and his ways, same as I do. No, don't you go to feeling too bad."

Dan Mowbry said harshly, "I don't stomach a dirty deal any better than the next fellow. And I'm not bragging when I say I don't lick easy. I'm going to see more of this fellow, Mister Bolivar Tyson!"

CHAPTER TWO

Pirate Power

THE next morning he stood on the point of a short finger pier and watched the big lumber yard of Bolivar Tyson in operation. Scores of men were at work everywhere, wagon after wagon was loading up with lumber, then rolling out across the Embarcadero and up into the hills of the city, where men from the far corners of the earth teemed and surged, played and fought, bargained and built. For this city was rich, enormously so, with the yellow metal flowing down from the distant diggings. It was rich in trade and frantic with commerce, in the limitless promise of the future and in the dreams of men who would build and construct and expand.

At a blunt, broad wharf fronting the yard, two schooners were tied up, decks piled high with the red brown lumber from the up-coast forests. Rope falls creaked and whined and booms swung as sling-load after sling-load of this lumber was lifted and swung out on to the wharf, where men carried it away to add to the towering piles in the yard. Out in the bay a little way a third heavily-laden schooner was at anchor, waiting its turn at the unloading wharf.

The fog had lifted. Crisp morning sunshine beat down out of a flawless sky. The bay was blue-green, dusted with sparkling white caps. Gulls soared and drifted on curved wings, or perched on the gaunt, bare yards of battered old windjammers, sluggishly rotting at anchor where their crews had left them to join in the mad hegira for the gold diggings.

It was a scene and an atmosphere to stir the blood of the most phlegmatic and Dan Mowbry was far from being insensible to it. But in him still burned a cold anger, for now he saw, coming up the curve of the bay and heading in for the Tyson yard, a couple of steam tugs. Each had a small scow in tow and

each scow was piled high with new pine lumber, still wet and dripping from immersion in bay waters. Cap'n Zeke Blood had been right. Tyson's men were out, busily salvaging the lumber from the raft they had broken up by their pirate tactics of the evening before.

Watching the tugs bring that pirated lumber in so deepened Dan Mowbry's anger he did not notice the approach of three people out along the pier toward him. They were within twenty feet of Dan when, still unconscious of their presence, he could no longer keep his helpless fury voiceless.

"The damned, dirty pirates! And damn Bolivar Tyson, too, as their thieving, pirate boss!"

His words brought a sound of surprise and resentment from the feminine member of the three, and that in turn brought Dan about to face them.

He saw her first, and went stock still with surprise. There was no forgetting that slim, light grace, that courageous little chin, that shining hair and fine free spirit. It was the girl of the storm off Hatteras, of the pestilential trail across the Isthmus. It was Elspeth Warren—and the memory of her was still with Dan—almost like a pain.

He fumbled awkwardly for his hat, doffed it, bowed slightly. "Miss Warren," he said.

She was equally startled. "Why," she gasped. "Why—you are—Dan Mowbry, who was so kind—to me—on the trail into Panama!" She looked up at the tall man beside her, tall with sharp features, with iron grey hair and mustache. "This is the gentleman I told you about, Uncle Bolivar!"

She broke off, reddening, to look at Dan Mowbry again, but now her little chin was tilted combatively. "You were calling Uncle Bolivar names—cursing him. I don't understand—"

Bolivar Tyson broke in. "Pay it no attention, Elspeth. The failures all curse me. Though I admit to curiosity in this case, for I can't remember ever laying eye on this fellow before."

For a brief moment Dan Mowbry had had the feeling of being cornered, but this remark by Tyson, condescending, slightly sneering, set up his bristles. "You would have seen me," he retorted, "if you did your dirty work by daylight and went along with your gang of hired thugs that broke up our lumber raft last evening. Yeah—an' maybe taken a dunkin' too' as that sneaking pup beside you did. Throw axes at me, will you?"

The other man of the trio glared at Dan—the thin-faced, darkly handsome member of the pirate crew who had been the last to break

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for the gig. One side of his face was still a dark, swollen bruise, where Dan's fist had landed.

The fellow snarled soundlessly, like some jungle cat and took a step toward Dan Mowbry, who squared away to meet him. But Bolivar Tyson spoke sharply. "Easy does it, Paul. Don't let this fellow's jeers mislead you. His talk doesn't make sense, anyhow. I've a notion to call some of the boys and have him thrown off the premises. Only for the fact that he seems to have done Elspeth some small favor on her trip across the Isthmus, I would."

High color burned in the girl's face. Plainly she was angry, but also just a trifle troubled and bewildered and uncertain. "I don't understand!" she flared at Dan. "Your accusations are ridiculous—what lumber raft are you talking about?"

"Ask him," answered Dan Mowbry grimly, jerking his head at Bolivar Tyson. "Or ask the other one—or both of them. Though they probably would lie to you. So I'll tell you. We were bringing a raft of pine lumber down from Sacramento. Last evening, right after the fog came in, they jumped us, out there in the bay. They came in a gig, a dozen of them, led by your dark-faced friend, there. Two others were on the raft with me. We fought as best we could, but the odds were too heavy. They cut the cradle hawsers, so the raft would break up and left the three of us to drown—"

Bolivar Tyson took the girl by the arm. His eyes were fuming. "Come away, Elspeth. The fellow's crazy. Don't listen to his ravings. And you," he rapped at Dan, "get off my premises—and stay away!"

The girl hung back, reluctant. There was still anger in her toward Dan, but her uncertainty was growing. "Why should Uncle Bolivar be interested in your lumber raft, one way or another? Why—"

Dan pointed a long arm. "Look at that sugar pine lumber piled on those scows yonder, coming in behind the tugs. Fresh from bay waters, that lumber. This time yesterday that lumber was part of our raft, coming down from Sacramento. Ask Bolivar Tyson if that isn't so, and make him tell you the truth. And see if you can get the truth out of your other friend, too. Ask him where and how he got that bruised and swollen jaw. See if you can get the truth out of them, Elspeth Warren. And then you'll know!"

He shouldered past them, then, and strode back along the pier to the mainland, headed uptown.

AT THE time of his original arrival in San Francisco, Dan Mowbry had spent little time there, consumed as he was with the gold-lust—but even so, he had seen enough of it to draw comparison to what it

was now. And the furious growth it had made in a few short months amazed and astounded him. Here was full proof of the value of sawn lumber in this madly growing "City of Gold." *Building-crazy*, had been Cap'n Zeke Blood's succinct description; a conservative one.

The pace of everything was feverish. Electric excitement was constantly in the air. All was hustle and bustle. Men of all nations, of all colors and languages crowded the streets. Extremes and contrast were on every hand. Dandies clad in the latest of fashions rubbed elbows with ragged, mud-spattered, frowzy miners, fresh down from the foaming gulches. Fine ladies in silks and satins whisked by Chinese coolies, carrying burdens on limber shoulder yokes. Corner peddlers hawked their wares, hurdy-gurdies tinkled and squeaked, while teamsters cursed the chuck and bog-holes their laboring horses had to struggle through.

Over in the Ten High Saloon a man in flesh-colored tights was walking a plank, fifteen feet long and three feet wide. He had been walking that plank for fifty hours without sleep. His goal was eighty hours. Hundreds paid admission to watch him and cheer him on, to lay bets as to whether he would, or would not be able to last eighty hours. To enliven their waiting and watching, those hundreds spent large sums of money over the Ten High Bar for liquid refreshment.

Across the street the proprietor of the Mountain Oak Saloon had solved his problem differently. A rope ring had been set up within the saloon and from an elevated stand outside the door a leather-lunged gentleman in a plug hat set up his challenging cry.

Inside the Mountain Oak the Frisco Kid was prepared to take on all comers. One hundred dollars in gold to the man who could stay two rounds with the fearsome Frisco Kid. One thousand dollars to the man who could whip him. Come one, come all, while not forgetting that the latest and best in the way of liquid refreshment was to be purchased across the Mountain Oak bar.

The result exceeded the Mountain Oak's proprietor's fondest dreams. Crowds jammed the place, thirsty crowds, and the bartenders, from having nothing to do, became overworked. Enough clumsy optimists came along to keep the Frisco Kid in a gentle glow of perspiration, but in no way threaten to collect the hundred dollars, let alone the thousand. For the most part these challengers were drifters, broke and desperate, weak from hardship and lack of sufficient food. They knew little or nothing of fisticuffs and with his bare and knotted maulers the Frisco Kid swiftly and brutally beat them into battered and bloody submission.

The latest of half a dozen victims had just been led from the ring, dazed and bleeding—

a young miner with plenty of courage, if nothing else. He had come within half a minute of staying the required two rounds and by his very bulldog tenacity had made the glowering Kid extend himself considerably. Other miners in the crowd tended their beaten champion and grumbled hatred at the Kid. The Kid squatted on a stool in his corner of the ring and took on a hefty snifter of whiskey to build up strength for the next victim.

Outside, the man in the plug hat bellowed the challenge to the street. From the ring a paunchy individual with slicked-down hair, who acted the part of referee, harangued that same challenge at the crowd in the saloon. And Dan Mowbry, pulling off his tattered coat, stepped forward and said curtly, "Right here. I'll give you game a whirl."

The crowd at the bar gulped their drinks, made a rush for the ring, avid for a close-up view of the next bit of slaughter. A burly, bearded miner touched Dan Mowbry's arm. "It's a sucker game, lad, with nothing in it for men like us. See what Luke Gaines got for his trouble. And Luke is pretty good in a brawl."

"The Kid was better," Dan pointed out. "And I could use that thousand dollars."

The bearded miner laughed curtly. "To win, you'd have to knock the Kid out. No matter what you did to him otherwise, they'd never declare you winner."

"I know that. So I'll knock him out. Even so, they'll probably try and get out of paying."

The bearded miner flexed his arms. "You knock him out, and they'll pay," he rumbled. "Else me and the others will tear this damned joint to pieces. Ay, lad—we'll see to it that you are paid. Good luck! I'm thinking you'll need it."

Dan Mowbry stripped to the waist, then stood quietly waiting in his corner of the ring. Bill Yount, the bearded miner, looking over the long, flat muscles on Dan's shoulders and arms, and noting the set to Dan's jaw, turned to a gambler who was chanting, "Two to one on the Kid! There's action for your money, gentlemen. Two to one on the Kid!"

"I'll take that, for ten ounces, mister," said Bill Yount. "I'll take that."

Dan Mowbry fixed his eyes on the Kid's middle—the others had all pounded his scowling face and bullet head, with as little effect as if they had been beating a cobble stone from one of the distant gold gulches. But a certain flabbiness existed about the Kid's middle and, after that last encounter those flabby belly muscles had been quivering, and the Kid had gulped his drink of whiskey almost as though he needed it. Dan concentrated now on what he had to do—and on a thousand dollars.

The gong rang and the Frisco Kid came surging out of his corner, his beady eyes glint-

ing from under their cartilaged brows, black and cruel. His knotted fists moved back and forth, like oil-slicked pistons. And he opened an expert gash under Dan Mowbry's left eye and shook him up badly with his first slashing blow.

Dan covered up as best he could, backed away. The Kid came after him, a sneering half-smile on his thick lips. He backed Dan into a corner, beat savagely at the curtain of fists and forearms with which Dan was trying to protect his head and face. He rolled from side to side under the power of the Kid's blows. But through it all, his eyes never left that spot he wanted to hit.

He let the Kid's attack beat him toward the floor. He planted his feet firmly and let his shoulders roll with a rain of fists—then back from that roll with another, put his whole weight and body into that smash, driving from his very toes.

There was a deep, fleshy thock as the blow landed and Dan could feel the Kid's body sag and give until his fist and wrist were fairly buried. . . .

For a moment the Frisco Kid was like a man paralyzed, or turned to stone. Then his chin dropped and from his open mouth came a stricken groan. He went down with a sodden crash.

There was a brief moment of stunned silence. Then from the crowd, especially the miner contingent, lifted a wild howl of joy. Bearded Bill Yount leaped into the ring and grabbed the slick-haired referee by the shoulder and shook him out of his daze. "Count! Count, damn you—count! Don't try any slick stuff or me and the boys will tear this place apart—an' you with it!"

Mechanically the referee obeyed, swinging his arm up and down ten times. He could have swung it a hundred. The Frisco Kid lay like a dead man, only his mouth opening and shutting like that of a stranded fish.

The shaken proprietor of the Mountain Oak groaned as he paid—but he paid. There was no mistaking the temper of the crowd. The triumphant miners seized upon Dan Mowbry, hoisted him to their shoulders and paraded around the saloon, then out into the street, whooping and howling like a band of wolves.

Fearing a riot of some kind the more timid citizens along the street fled. A carriage, drawn by a team of spirited black horses was coming along the street. Frightened by the uproar, the horses began to rear and plunge and Bolivar Tyson, at the reins, was forced to all his strength and skill to keep the animals from bolting, then and there. Beside Tyson sat Elspeth Warren and her startled eyes lifted to rest for a long moment on Dan Mowbry, still on his uncertain perch on the shoulders of the jostling miners.

Dan did not look his best. He was disheveled and mauled. Blood from the cut which the Frisco Kid had opened under his left eye had dribbled and was smeared across his face. There were plenty of men in the whooping crowd considerably the worse for liquor, some of them waving partially emptied bottles. Triumphant profanity mingled with their equally triumphant howls.

Dan saw the startled wonder in Elspeth Warren's eyes darken and change to disgust, then loathing, and when her uncle, Bolivar Tyson finally got his team under control and the carriage went spinning away, she was looking straight ahead, her little chin high and firm, spots of furious color burning in either cheek.

And for some strange reason Dan himself could hardly fathom, he turned and grinned after her.

THE *Vixen* thrashed her slow, but steady way up the Sacramento River. Dan Mowbry stood in the pilot house with Cap'n Zeke. His thick brown hair was neatly shorn, his face clean shaven. A strip of plaster concealed the healing cut under his eye. From head to foot he was clad in fresh, new clothes. But the hell of youth dominated his bronzed face; his mouth was grim and his blue eyes savagely thoughtful.

From astern came the hoarse, imperative blast of a river steamer's whistle. Cap'n Zeke reached for his own whistle cord and gave answer, then spun the wheel to send the *Vixen* edging over toward the eastern bank, making way for the big, gleaming white boat that came storming up to move abeam of, then past.

"The *Sierra*," said Cap'n Zeke. "One of the two new big fast boats that Bolivar Tyson has put into the river trade. Other one is the *Emigrant*. Aims to give the rest of us a run for our money, Tyson does. Understand he's cuttin' freight and passenger rates right down to the bone, figuring to bust the trade, then pick up the pieces. Which is Bolivar Tyson for you, all over. When he moves into anything, he moves whole hog."

Dan Mowbry did not answer. He was staring after the *Sierra*, for he thought he had seen, among the group of first class passengers standing up forward on her upper deck, a familiar slim figure, with that unforgettable, painful tilt to her head and chin.

Cap'n Zeke, puffing at his stubby pipe, went on conversationally. "One thing I can't understand is Tyson agreeing to that pretty little niece of his marrying Paul Humphrey. And that is the way the talk is. From all I hear, the girl is a fine little thoroughbred. And that Paul Humphrey—well, he's no damned good. Plenty of shady business behind that swab. Got run out of St. Louis because of some crooked deal

in furs—cheated a bunch of trappers out of a whole season's catch and they chased him durned near to New Orleans before he got clear. They claim he could teach a jackrabbit things—and she—well, she'd run t'other way. I can understand Tyson usin' Humphrey, but I can't understand even Bolivar Tyson putting a curse on a fine girl's future, 'specially when she's his sister's daughter."

The youthful hell deepened in Dan's face, but he said nothing. Cap'n Zeke grew silent, too, and the *Vixen* beat her sturdy way onward toward a distant turn beyond which the *Sierra* had already vanished. . . .

In the soft, warm after-glow of sunset the *Vixen* nosed up to Sacramento's sprawling river front. The *Sierra*, proud and white and gleaming, had long since tied up at her berth, her engines stilled. The *Vixen* berthed farther up, just off Peter Jensen's lumber yard. With lines out and secured, fore and aft and engines at rest, Cap'n Zeke Blood turned to Dan Mowbry.

"Might as well go give Pete Jensen the bad news and get it over with."

Dan nodded and the two of them headed up through the yard, past orderly piles of clean, white lumber which gave off the fragrance of high pine forests. The mill had stilled, the work of the day was over. They found Peter Jensen in his office in a small building near the gate of the yard. He was a big, slow-moving man, yellow-haired, with grave, sea-blue eyes looking steadily out of a square, decent face.

He said, the hint of a tired smile pulling at his broad lips, "You don't need to look like a chicken-killing pup, Zeke. I know all about it. It wasn't your fault."

Cap'n Zeke let out a long breath of relief. "Thought sure we were going to make it, Pete. We were past the tide split. Then the fog came in, thick as soup, and they jumped the raft in the fog. Mowbry here, and his two helpers were on the raft and put up the best fight they knew how. They took quite a beating. But the odds were way over them. They were on the raft when it broke up and only a lot of luck helped me get 'em safe aboard. In the old days they hung men for piracy, but Bolivar Tyson, damn him, gets away with it and comes back for more."

Peter Jensen shrugged. "I knew it was a gamble when I sent the raft down. I think I'd have been more surprised if you'd got through all right." He looked at Dan Mowbry. "There were no serious injuries to you, or to your helpers?"

Dan, shaking his head, reached inside his shirt and pulled out a money belt. He opened the pouches and poured a pile of twenty dollar gold slugs on to Jensen's desk.

"A thousand dollars there," he said quietly.

"Yours. Only a small part of what that raft of lumber was worth, but it is the best I can do, right now."

Peter Jensen stared at the money and then at Dan, and a queer startled look came into those sea-blue eyes. "Let me understand this right. You want me to accept this thousand dollars because the lumber raft was not safely delivered—because you were in charge of the raft?"

"That's right," Dan nodded. "You had a lot of money sunk in that raft and you trusted me to guard it safely. I fell down on the job. This is the least I can do toward making good your loss."

Peter Jensen looked at the money again, picked up a handful and let it dribble through his fingers with a dull, rich clinking. "When I hired you on," he murmured, "you said you were almost broke, that you had only a couple of ounces of dust in your poke. Now you have—this. How did you get hold of it?"

Dan hesitated, shrugged, and told of his fight with the Frisco Kid. Peter Jensen said slowly, "You have made up my mind for me. I will accept this money—on one condition. That it buys a partnership in my business. I have been looking for a man like you, Dan Mowbry. The reason you want to pay me is that you can't bear the thought of Bolivar Tyson's having licked you—even once. That's more than honesty—it's pride. I can use a pride like that—in case my own ever fails." He smiled faintly. "Bolivar Tyson was in to see me, little more than an hour ago. He came up river on the *Sierra*. He offered to buy me out."

"Buy you out!" exclaimed Cap'n Zeke.

Jensen nodded. "At a shrewd price and with a threat attached. If I did not sell to him, he said he would see to it that I never delivered a stick of lumber to the San Francisco market. He's a curly wolf, is Bolivar Tyson—but he growls in the open. And I was considering the offer, until now. But if he'll buy, I'd rather sell to Dan. What d'you say?"

Dan leaned forward. "My fight with Tyson is my own—and his choosing. I don't need to buy into that. But if you mean that about the firm—"

"Mean it?" Jensen laughed. "You'll never know how! We'll shake on it—and drink on it."

CHAPTER THREE

Wages of Honor

MUSIC drifted through the night. It came from the topline of the *Sierra*, where lights glowed brightly and where women in dainty silks and satins danced with gentlemen in evening attire. For Bolivar Tyson was advertising and bidding for busi-

ness for his two fine, new luxury river steamers. His guest list for the sumptuous banquet held in the *Sierra's* dining salon earlier in the evening, and for the dancing and gaiety now going on, included all of the more prominent merchants and businessmen and their wives and daughters, of Sacramento. Bolivar Tyson had traded long in human nature.

He stood in the shadow of the pilot house, a master of more than ships, his teeth set firmly in a perfecto. But his sharply-cut, somewhat predatory features did not reflect entire satisfaction over the progress of the evening, for, shortly earlier, a note had been delivered to his hand. It was written by Peter Jensen and informed him that under no conditions would he, Peter Jensen, consider selling his business. Bolivar Tyson had not liked that.

Otherwise it was a perfect night. Warm and balmy with a round, golden moon looking down. The faintly stirring breeze carried the moist breath of the river, of Bolivar's future success, to mingle with the dry, sweet scent of great grassy plains to the west. Bolivar had vision.

Along the riverbank people moved, watching and listening to the scenes and sounds of gaiety aboard the *Sierra*. Some were miners, lonely and homesick, weary from the hardships and killing labor of the gold gulches. Others were loafers, drifters, unsavory characters, whose eyes were furtive and vicious as they watched wealth and beauty—but all of it was advertisement, too.

One member of the shadowy watchers was Dan Mowbry.

He was neither homesick nor vicious. But he was lonely and his eyes followed as best they could a certain slim figure with up-tilted chin as she danced with this and that admirer. In turn he envied each of her partners and one of them in particular he found himself hating—the darkly handsome Paul Humphrey. And she danced with Humphrey enough to give credence to the bit of gossip which Cap'n Zeke Blood had aired on the trip up-river. And the young hell in Dan Mowbry's eyes and face grew darker at the thought.

Presently she disappeared and Dan turned away and prowled down the river front, too restless to go back to the *Vixen* and his bunk. He told himself savagely that if he had an ounce of common sense he would shut the girl out of his mind, once and forever. Whenever there were others about, she had been far away—and never farther than now. She was as far as that lazy, golden moon up yonder. And yet, the tide will rise to the moon, no matter how hopelessly.

He shook himself, turned back, determined to seek his rest, so that he might, tomorrow, throw his full energy into this new partnership with Peter Jensen. For here was some-

thing real and definite, here was the opportunity this frontier country had promised him, all along. Here was the thing he had come for. Forget the girl and put every ounce of thought and energy into making this opportunity good—into his fight with her!

So he came back through the moonlight and the shadows, into the reach of the music from the *Sierra* and the reflected glow of its lights. And he was just in time to hear a soft cry of indignation and alarm. He spun toward the sound and saw a slim, cloak-clad figure struggling in the grip of one of the drifters. He heard the man's voice, hoarse, laughing, half-drunkenly.

"Been watchin' you all night—an' here you are! All evenin' you been dancin' with nobody better'n me—why you little devil—"

Dan Mowbry heard her voice, furious, thin with fear. "You filthy beast—let go of me—let go of me—" not proud—rather like a child.

Dan went in like a maddened catamount. He locked an arm about his man's throat until something gave. And when it gave he was in a fight with no holds barred—and reveling in it. He was ready for murder himself—until a soft voice brought him out of it. Then he decided to let mayhem be—and was rather surprised to find his opponent fall, limp and relaxed, when he released him.

He whirled on the girl, swearing. "Espeth Warren!" he exploded. "You damned little idiot! Haven't you any better sense than to be roaming this riverfront at night, and alone? You ought to be whipped!"

He had, curiously, the impression that she was, her fright forgotten, laughing at him.

But what she said was, "Don't—don't be too angry with me, Dan Mowbry. I was—was looking for you!"

ALL he could think of at the moment was to get Elspeth Warren quickly and safely back aboard the *Sierra*, so, gripping her elbow, he started leading her that way. But she hung back.

"Now I've found you I want to walk and talk with you, Dan Mowbry." There was a hard little note in her voice, and Dan suddenly remembered that tilt of her chin.

"All right." He swung her completely around and led her down-river along the waterfront. They moved past scattered buildings and out into a little meadow by the river where the great oaks lifted, dark and still, where the moonlight traced silver patterns through the branches and where the night seemed to close in with a warm and fragrant hush. The fact that he unerringly led her here surprised Dan himself.

The girl lifted her face toward the sky. "This," she said, "is better."

Dan, still troubled and a little uncertain,

was disconcertingly aware that once more they were alone—and once more, she seemed very close to him.

"What gave you the idea that you might find me, there along the riverfront?" he asked.

She laughed, softly. "I saw you down there, saw you while I was dancing. You stood in a flare of light from the boat once, and I saw you clearly. Didn't you see me stare right back at you?"

"No!" he growled. "And it was a silly thing for you to come wandering down alone. This riverfront is tough."

"I knew you'd look after me, and you did—as you've done before. You seem destined to look after me, Dan Mowbry."

"And you seem destined to need it. Why did you come looking for me?"

For a little time she did not answer, seemed to be thinking. Then she said gravely, "I wanted to be with someone and talk with someone who was—trustworthy. And you are the one person I know, out here in this wild, roaring frontier country whom I know I can fully trust."

And Dan couldn't be sure of whether she meant that as a stab or a compliment.

After a while she dropped a little hand on his arm. "We live and we learn, my friend. I know more now than I knew before. For instance, I know that Bolivar Tyson's men did pirate your raft of lumber. And I know why you fought the Frisco Kid and what you did with the thousand dollars you won by whipping him. That was a very generous and honest proposition you made to Peter Jensen with that hard-won money, Dan Mowbry."

Dan colored. "How in blazes did you learn all this?"

"By listening," she said demurely. "I heard one of Bolivar Tyson's new business guests telling him about it. This man apparently thought nothing of violating Peter Jensen's confidence in the matter. Uncle Bolivar, of course, is furious about it, for I understand he had anticipated buying out Pete Jensen and he feels that your new partnership with Peter Jensen has done more than blocked the sale."

Dan Mowbry caught the girl by her slim shoulders, turned her so the moonlight fell full upon her face as he stared down at her gravely. "Why are you telling me this, Elspeth Warren?"

Her gaze sustained his so steadily that Dan, in sudden panic, let go of her, for fear that the next moment he would sweep her up in his arms, for of a sudden the impulse to do so was almost overpowering.

The faintest of smiles touched her lips. "I may know little of lumber—but I'm learning, Dan Mowbry." And it seemed to Dan that briefly her glance touched his forehead.

"You may take this as a warning. And you may take me back to the *Sierra*."

He let go of her with a curious reluctance and turned to walk beside her. And after a while, out of deep thought and without looking at her he said, "You're a most amazing small person. And—a very wonderful one, Elspeth Warren." It seemed to ease the ache in his arms.

And she was suddenly shy. "No—but I am not the fool that Bolivar Tyson thinks I am. I have ears to listen with and eyes to see with and a sense of gratitude to one who was so kind and courteous to me during that dreadful trip across the Isthmus into Panama. We are going back to the *Sierra* now, aren't we, Dan Mowbry?"

"Yes."

They walked back, slowly, and strangely silent. Through Dan Mowbry's mind one question was racing and it had incomprehensibly little to do with lumber—either pine or redwood. It took a lot of courage on his part to finally voice this question, but he brought himself to it.

"There is gossip to the effect that—that you may marry Paul Humphrey, Elspeth Warren. That Bolivar Tyson would have it so."

Her hand, resting on his arm, tightened just a trifle. "Bolivar Tyson would have it so," she admitted. "And Paul Humphrey. I am far from being convinced, however. I have many reservations on the thing—"

Again Dan's arms ached. And this time he might have obeyed their strictures, but a harsh voice intervened.

It was Bolivar Tyson's, coming up through the moon-glazed darkness. With him was Paul Humphrey. Anger was in both of them, and as they both recognized Dan, that soundless snarl came over Humphrey's darkly handsome features. But he made no further advance.

Tyson rapped angrily, "As hostess for the evening, Elspeth, I expected you to—"

The girl cut him off with a crisp gesture. "I grew very weary of some of your guests, Uncle

Bolivar. Mr. Mowbry was seeing me back to the *Sierra*."

There was command in the pressure of her hand, so Dan led her on to where the *Sierra* still glowed with light and throbbed with gaiety. At the gangplank she turned and her slim, cool little hand found its way into Dan's palm.

"Thank you for a very pleasant interval, Dan Mowbry," she said quietly. "And while gossip of certain kinds may persist, you may believe that my reservations concerning it are very real and fixed, with little prospect of change. Good night!"

Then she was gone across the gang plank, quickly and lightly. Dan watched her out of sight then turned to face Bolivar Tyson and Paul Humphrey.

He waited.

Bolivar Tyson said harshly, "I find you hanging around my boat, or causing further annoyance to my niece, and I'll call my crew and have you—"

Dan laughed. It seemed suddenly the natural thing. "Always ready to call in someone else to do your dirty work, eh Tyson? Like Humphrey here. Well, maybe you'll find him useful at that—when your time comes to run like a rabbit. Maybe—now."

His laughter died—he couldn't help it. He stepped forward and Bolivar Tyson retreated quickly across the gangplank. But not Paul Humphrey, who darted a hand to a pocket and when that hand came away it carried something which gleamed metallically in the moonlight.

So Dan hit him instead, and for a second time, after taking Dan Mowbry's fist in his face, Paul Humphrey reeled back, fought dazedly for balance he could not find, and ended up in water, this time in the dark, restless water of the river. As he went in he also lost the derringer he had drawn and by the time he crawled out on the bank, drenched and shaken, Dan Mowbry was sauntering away.

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AUBURN RUBBER CORP.

IN A quiet backwater below Peter Jensen's lumber yard, a new lumber raft was being put together. It was larger than either of the two that had gone to disaster before it. To its building, Dan Mowbry had brought new ideas of cradling and cribbing. Cap'n Zeke Blood took a cargo of hides and tallow downriver and brought back a huge pile of heavy chain which he'd got, virtually for the taking, from the deserted hulks of sailing craft, rotting at their moorings in the bay.

Of this chain Dan Mowbry and his men fashioned a metal backbone which ran through the heart of the raft for its entire length. Lengths of lighter chain, like the branches of a tree, reached out from this at intervals, on either side. Then, with the lumber carefully stacked in place, these chains were wound around and brought together, binding everything into a solid whole.

It was more costly than using lashings of manila hawser—but it was meant to be used for more. And, as Dan explained to Peter Jensen, the chain fabric could be saved and used over and over again.

Dan had thrown himself furiously into the task. He worked twice as hard as any of his helpers. When the job was finally completed, Dan and Joe Hannibal and Sam Grainer went over the raft carefully from end to end, checking every chain and timber. They went over the fight they'd had, too, and over possible—even probable—future fights.

"Let 'em try and work on this one with their axes," growled Joe Hannibal. "They'll have a wild surprise, Dan. Even so, I hope this time we have something better to fight with than just our fists. I have no yearning to end up in that bay again. This time might be one time too many."

"Let 'em repeat just one mistake," Dan growled grimly. "Or even invent a few new ones. We'll be ready. This raft goes through."

And they were ready. The *Vixen*, her cargo deck piled high with cord-wood fuel for her engines in anticipation of a long, slow drag, was moored ahead of the raft, her bow downstream. The towing hawser was in place, running up over the Texas deck above the paddle wheel and on to the *Vixen's* hog post. The raft loomed bigger than the doughty little towboat herself. Cap'n Zeke Blood scratched his head ruefully.

"You've laid out a job for the *Vixen* and me, Dan Mowbry. It will take time and steam and tide to get that lumber and iron safe to South Bay. How much of it is there?"

"Close to five hundred thousand board feet—of lumber. You'll notice we've about stripped the yard. Close to everything Peter Jensen owns is riding in that raft—enough to carry the iron. Safe at San Francisco it means fifty thousand dollars—enough to carry the busi-

ness. And we'll take it through, Cap'n Zeke." "Aye, lad," Zeke said slowly. "We'll take it through."

They were to start at dawn the next morning. That evening Dan Mowbry began sauntering through the streets of Sacramento. He was looking for men who were as he had been one day, not so very long before. Men down from the diggings, with the gold fever burned out of them. Yet decent men, some yearning to go home, others to find more familiar work. He found his replicas in almost indecent numbers. He had to get choosy.

Dan Mowbry combed them over, talked to them. To a few, who shaped up just right, he made his proposition. The result was that after dark had settled in deeply, men began appearing at the gangplank of the *Vixen*, where Dan Mowbry met them, talked with them again and led them aboard. All told, there were a full dozen and all tempered by injustice of one form or another—and all wanting a place to stow their meager belongings and spread thin blankets. They taught Dan both humility and pride.

Peter Jensen came aboard for a final conference. He said little, leaving most of it to Dan.

Dan said, "I believe I've prepared for every emergency."

While the raft had been building, Bolivar Tyson's two big steamers, the *Sierra* and the *Emigrant* had been making steady, alternate trips between Sacramento and San Francisco. Their berth was some distance down the riverfront from the eddy where the lumber raft was taking shape, but Dan knew that from their lofty pilot houses it was easy to watch the progress of the raft; he also knew that Bolivar Tyson would know of the raft's forming and its intended destination. Nor had he been keeping it secret.

Tyson would also know that Peter Jensen could not go on losing his lumber as he had lost the first two rafts, and stay in business. Tyson would realize that one more big loss would probably finish Jensen in a financial way and then Jensen's yard and mill would almost certainly come into his voracious hands. So, it was a safe bet that Tyson would do his best to see to it that this raft, over twice as big as either of the other two, would never arrive in the San Francisco market in Jensen's possession.

These things were in Dan Mowbry's mind again as alone, under the midnight stars, he made a final round of inspection. It was pretty much unnecessary caution on his part, but it gave him something to do to justify his restlessness. Otherwise he was always on the fringe of a dream that held a slim figure with a proud, brave carriage—Elsbeth Warren. But she seemed so far away again—so remote

as not to be considered—yet there she was.

A shadowy figure came along the river-bank and as Dan turned alertly, a voice said softly, "Señor, if you please! I look for a man named Mowbry. I have a message for him. If the *Señor* would tell me where I might find—"

"Right here," said Dan. "I'm Mowbry."

"Keno! That is good. I have fulfilled my promise."

The Mexican thrust a small envelope into Dan's hand, then melted silently into the shadows, before Dan could speak to him further. Dan went aboard the *Vixen*, up to his cabin, where he got a light going. There was no writing on the envelope, but the enclosure held a few lines of fine, dainty feminine script.

Dan Mowbry:

The pirates will be prowling. Beware the schooner, *Osprey*. Do not fail yourself, or me, dear friend. I think often of our walk in the moonlight along the river bank.

E. W.

Dan had, too, and often fearfully.

IN THE gray dawn the *Vixen's* wheel began to beat, the towing hawser twanged taut and the raft slid ponderously out of the eddy and began its long journey. And among the boats along the river-front which it left behind was the gleaming white *Emigrant*, of Bolivar Tyson's line.

The current helped some but as the *Vixen* and her tow reached the lower, more sluggish reaches of the delta region this current grew less and less. They began to meet the tides, each ebb helping, each flow hindering, until at times it seemed to Dan Mowbry that they were hardly moving at all. But the *Vixen* huffed and puffed and her wheel chewed doggedly at the river waters and remorselessly pushed the tree-lined banks behind them and new vistas opened ahead.

Other boats passed them, heading upstream and down. One of the latter which stormed up from astern, foamed by and was swiftly gone, was the *Emigrant*.

Cap'n Zeke Blood, a knee hooked through the pilot house wheel while he loaded and lighted his stubby pipe, mumbled, "Notice how they looked us over as they went by, Dan? If Bolivar Tyson never knew before what we were doing, he'll know when the *Emigrant* reaches the bay."

Dan Mowbry nodded. "Tyson has known all about us from the time the first stick of the raft was laid, Cap'n Zeke. What he doesn't know is that we're ready for him. He never thought anybody knew enough for that."

Cap'n Zeke looked skyward, enigmatically. "Bless that Elspeth Warren lass, I say."

And Dan was angry.

At the end of a long day they were still short of the straits, so they tied up along the bank and waited out the tide, then caught the ebb again just after midnight and met the morning sun at the head of the straits. They crawled through the straits at a snail's pace, breasting the flow and at the welcome turn, with another ebb to help them, moved out into the broad southern reaches of San Pablo Bay.

"We'll meet the next flow at the head of San Francisco Bay," said Cap'n Zeke, with satisfaction. "It will be slow work then until we hit the split, after which we'll ride into South Bay slick as you please. And if there is fog laying beyond the Heads it will probably stay there, for I see no sign of it along the hills."

Boats continued to pass them, going and coming, but all intent on their own business. One of these was a schooner, heading up-river, but it passed them on a long tack to the star-board, at no time being close enough for Dan to read the lettering of its name.

True to Cap'n Zeke's prediction they had made the turn into the head of San Francisco Bay proper before the turn of the tide, but now, with the sun going down beyond the Golden Gate, the tide from the ocean met them and with it came a spanking breeze. The *Vixen*, rolling thicker smoke from her stubby stack, drove stubbornly on.

Now the sun was gone and the western sky was banded in crimson and gold, swiftly fading. The hills which cupped the bay lay still under a haunting powder-blue mist. And now, out of a pocket of half shadow came the schooner *Osprey*, her canvas fat with wind as she slid across the *Vixen's* bow on a port tack.

Somehow, the moment Dan Mowbry laid eyes on her, he knew her for what she was. Even though, in the thickening twilight he could not read her name, still he knew. For she had the look about her. Her canvas was foul with stain and patch, her paint faded and scabbed. And there was a ribald recklessness about her tack—she had the look of outlaw all over her.

Cap'n Zeke Blood eyed her grimly. "She's got the slink of a wolf to her, Dan Mowbry. She's up to mischief. Best get those fighting men of yours ready. She's putting us under her lee so that when she closes, wind and tide will hold her against us."

Dan gathered his men, out of sight of the *Osprey*. To each he handed out a pick handle. "Here's where you earn your passage, as was our bargain," he told them. "Don't be afraid to lay on your weight. They mean that treatment for us."

Men toughened by toil in the diggings spat on calloused hands, grinned as they flourished their pick handles. To many, wielding that pick-handle would be privilege; to others, ad-

venture. It had been a long, slow, tiresome trip. They looked forward to something to enliven it. Joe Hannibal and Sam Grainer Dan drew aside. To them he handed pistols.

"Keep apart from the main ruckus, you two—and watch for extra dirty work," Dan ordered grimly. "If it comes, shoot—and shoot to kill. It's time Bolivar Tyson and his brigand outfit learned a real lesson."

There was no guard on the raft proper. It would take more than a few men with axes to break up this raft. And there were a couple of rifles up in the pilot house to handle this contingency, if it came.

Dan went back up to the pilot house. "We're ready for them," he told Cap'n Zeke.

"Which is well for us," growled Cap'n Zeke. "Here they come!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Fury

THE *Osprey* had come about into the wind. Now she lay over and came edging up abeam, closing in at an angle. A burly individual was at her rail, looking the *Vixen* over intently. He turned, yelled something to the man at the wheel, and then closed swiftly in.

Dan called down to his waiting pick handle men. "All right, boys! Look sharp. Meet them right at the rail!"

Her lofty masts and yards and spread of sail made the schooner loom high above the dumpy little *Vixen*. But hull to hull it was a different matter and when the *Osprey* ground against the *Vixen* with a rending shock, it was the *Osprey* ribs and planking which gave way against the solid oak of the *Vixen's* fender. But the vessels were jammed beam to beam and out of the open hatchway of the *Osprey* came a racing crew.

Obviously the *Osprey* had expected some resistance, but hardly this amount, or with such purpose. Those clubbing pick handles had half a dozen *Osprey* rascals down with battered, bleeding heads almost before the rest realized what they had rushed into, and the miners made the most of it. They pressed the renegades back, swinging savagely.

But it was nip and tuck—bitter, merciless fighting. Very quickly the miners realized this and they wasted no further breath in taunting yells, but fought with grim fury. The brawny renegade leader wrenched a pick handle from a miner, knocked the original possessor spinning and charged down on the other defenders. Dan Mowbry closed with him.

He had the weight on Dan, but not the purpose. For Dan Mowbry had come across a continent to find his destiny and make the most of it. Now this destiny was at stake—and some-

how a girl was in it—a dream—but such a dream as men die for.

And Dan was ready to die for it, but not the leader of the *Osprey*. He reached for a knife—and somewhere behind Dan a pistol barked spitefully, and a round, blue hole appeared magically just under the hairline of the leader's sloping brow. His eyes rolled, fluttered and then he went down, all loose and sprawling. And Dan Mowbry knew that either Joe Hannibal or Sam Grainer had been true to their watch and trust.

The fall of their leader took all the fight out of the *Osprey*. Those still on their feet scrambled frantically back, while up in the pilot house of the *Vixen*, watching carefully, Cap'n Zeke Blood threw his wheel hard over and began pulling away to port.

The wind, pushing the *Osprey* hard against the *Vixen's* fender, hindered. But the tide, pushing the schooner back, while the *Vixen* bored ahead, helped. With scrape and creak and groan, with the crunch and rip of planking, the boats parted and the *Osprey* began sliding astern. She barely missed sagging into the gap between the *Vixen* and the raft. But Cap'n Zeke had both *Vixen* and raft swinging by this time and the raft pulled clear under the *Osprey's* quarter.

Forlorn howls from the *Osprey* told a story as the *Osprey* grew more ghostly with distance and deepening dusk—it was plain to see by the swing of her rigging that she was already listing badly.

"Sink, damn you—sink!" Cap'n Zeke growled feelingly. "Sink or swim for it, you harbor rats. And thank Bolivar Tyson for it all!"

RIDING the tide beyond the split the *Vixen* and her tow, a little battered, but still sound and sturdy, felt their way along under a starlit sky to safe anchorage in South Bay. There the dingy was ordered out and began moving between *Vixen* and beach, landing the miner guards who had more than earned their passage. One or two of them were battered up a bit, but no injury was serious and they went off in high spirits.

In his own cabin, Cap'n Zeke finished washing and bandaging Dan Mowbry's wounded side.

"It was a mean thrust," said Cap'n Zeke, "by a mean rat. But there're more of him. Better go ashore right away and see can you locate Tom Holloway and deal with him for the lumber. His office is the corner of Kearny and Clay Streets and he often works there to all hours of the night. You'll live for all of this wound—but not if Bolivar Tyson follows his advantage."

With smooth, easy strokes, Dan Mowbry drove the dingy across the star spangled bay

waters. His wounded side, as Cap'n Zeke had said, was of little moment, no more than a scratch. It smarted and burned—but it couldn't even dim a dream. . . .

He was nearly there when the first tolling of the bell sounded. It meant nothing to Dan Mowbry, but it meant much to the older citizens of San Francisco. For they had heard it before and knew the dread menace of it. Even to the drunk who stumbled out of a random doorway, it meant much.

For Dan heard him mumbling. "It's burned before and it's burning now. It will burn again. And always they build it up again. It's the way this San Francisco is. Let 'er burn!"

And now, whipping about a street corner on a gust of wind, Dan Mowbry caught the first acrid whiff of smoke. Behind him there was shouting, the sharp, alarmed clanging of another bell, the pound of running feet and the skid and clatter of wheels. And here came a fire company, racing along, pulling their hand pumper and hose cart behind them. Crowds began to fill the street, all running in one direction, to the north along Kearny Street.

The atmosphere of rising excitement and alarm caught up Dan Mowbry and he ran with them. Now, up ahead, he could see the rolling billows of smoke, red-tinted from leaping flames.

Somewhere up ahead a man bellowed, "It's going to be a bad one, spreading like the wrath of hell. Started in Tyson's lumber yards and they're going like a tinder box!"

Bolivar Tyson's lumber yards—it was fitting but Dan could not see it. Dan still saw nothing but his dream—and the ache and the peril the fire cost him. Where was she?

Dan saw engine companies toiling with incredible will and bravery and they were pitiful pygmies before a ravening giant. When a man at a pumping bar fell with exhaustion, Dan darted in and took his place, laboring madly—for her sake—until the sweat blinded him and the smoke choked him and the heat seared intolerably. And the engine company had to retreat, stumbling, sick, exhausted, dragging their equipment to safety behind them.

A man gasped, "It's no use—no use! With this wind behind it, it will go clear to the waterfront. There have been some we've been able to stop. But only the bay can stop this one—"

Now the casualties began to show. Men brought them through the flame riven smoke, some still able to stumble along, with the aid of a helping shoulder. Others were carried out in blankets and some were ominously still.

Cold horror made Dan Mowbry sick and shaken. High up along the face of a burning building the smoke cleared momentarily and he saw at a window a woman poised, leaning

forward. She leaped and her burning clothes trailed flame behind her like a falling meteor. The flame and her scream curved down together and ended in the crimson cauldron below.

Dan headed west then, into the drive of the wind, and got beyond the smoke and heat. The cold breath of the wind cleared his lungs, his eyes, chilled the sweat on him. Crowds hovered here, on the safe side of the fire, watching the towering flames drive remorselessly toward the waterfront. Dan went north and came out on the side of a hill, too steep to hold a building on its slope. Here he was away from people, or thought he was, until he saw a dark figure silhouetted against the red glare below. The figure was all unconscious of Dan's presence and Dan would have passed by except that he heard the man suddenly laugh, a strangely wild and vicious sound. And then he spoke, aloud.

"There's your fine dream, Bolivar Tyson—there it is, going up in smoke! You can thank me for that, Tyson. I set it off. I told you I'd get even. Used me while you needed me, that's what you did. Then pushed me aside. You promised me a half partnership and I found it was only another of your empty promises. You promised me the girl, and that meant nothing, either. You couldn't control her—or me. And where is she now? Why, she's trapped—"

The sound grew small in Dan's ears, like the smothered cry of an insect. And as though he were an insect, Dan went up to kill him. No thought that the other was a man was in his mind as his hands closed over that throat. . . .

AND yet he did not kill him. They came down into the flame and the smoke, did Dan Mowbry and Paul Humphrey, Dan driving Humphrey before him. For Humphrey was a craven, terror-stricken wretch, now, holding to one precious bit of information—he had seen her. His other weapons had been drawn from him—it was the one charm he still possessed.

"You live," Dan Mowbry had told him, "only if you lead me to Elspeth Warren, and we find her safe. Otherwise I drive you into the flames and watch you crisp—" He meant it.

They bore north and east toward the waterfront. They reached the beach and edged along it, in some places waist deep in water. But here also the flames were reaching and warehouses and docks were beginning to go. They wallowed across mud flats and foul, stinking little sloughs aslime with sewage. Ahead of them a warehouse burst into flame and there was no way past it but to swim.

"Past that," mumbled Humphrey thickly, "there is clear beach—and then the pier. But there is no way back."

"I'll find one," Dan Mowbry said tonelessly.

"No! I can't swim. I can't—I tell you—"

"You'll swim—or drown. Don't argue with me, you filthy whelp, or I'll drown you with my bare hands before I leave you."

"No!" shrieked Humphrey. "No—"

He ran, knee deep in water and mud. Dan Mowbry lunged after him. But Humphrey had a few strides start and his terror of water, it seemed, was greater than that of fire. For he gained solid ground ahead of Dan, just as a wall of the furiously burning warehouse began to sag. Dan saw the threat, stopped and gave back. But Humphrey, running blind, was right under it as it swayed outward and fell, a crashing sheet of flame.

The heat was like a gust of terrible wind, driving Dan Mowbry back to the waters of the bay. He slipped into them and began to swim, circling the blazing shoreline where the warehouse had stood. He wasn't feeling anything any more, he was hardly thinking.

He was merely swimming because out there—somewhere—there might be Elspeth Warren. . . .

Beyond the burning warehouse it was as Humphrey had said it would be. A narrow strip of beach and then the pier, reaching out into the bay. Yet already the pier, the landward end of it, for some hundred feet, was burning. Ashore there was nothing but a sea of flame and smoke, where Bolivar Tyson's lumber yards had stood. And of course, it was useless to hope that Elspeth Warren. . . .

Then he saw her, saw her in the terrible reflected glow of the fire. She was on the very tip of the pier above the dark waters, trapped there by the advancing flames along the pier, a small, pitiful figure, down on her knees, facing not the flames, but the bay.

New strength whipped through Dan Mowbry in a lifting torrent. He lunged toward the pier end with powerful strokes and he called up to her. "Elspeth Warren—Elspeth Warren!"

The voice of the flames was a far, crackling, awesome roar against which all other sounds were puny. Yet she heard him, for her head lifted wonderingly and he saw her looking about.

"Down here!" he called again. "Down here below you. It's Dan Mowbry—I've come for you—"

He heard her thin and wondering cry, which was half sob. He called, "I can swim enough for both of us, Elspeth Warren." He added with a curious note of joyful mockery, "Our destinies—remember? You'll have to jump. Don't fear—I'll be with you—"

She hesitated no longer. She jumped. The next moment Dan had one arm about her, the other about a piling of the pier end. She clung to him, sobbing and wailing, her arm about

his neck. He gave her a moment or two to quiet. . . .

Dan swam slowly, letting the tide carry them. The water was lurid with reflected fire-glow and the smoke boiled and billowed. Glowing cinders, trailing smoke threads, drifted down into the water about Dan and Elspeth Warren, making little hissing, sputtering sounds as they quenched. Somewhere ahead and to the right, deep and rumbling explosions sounded at intervals, where fire-fighters were blasting away buildings in an effort to form a break.

And it was one of these furiously toiling fire-fighters, two blocks beyond the front of the fire, who stared with amazement some half hour later at two dripping figures moving through the smoke, the slim feminine figure supported by the circle of her companion's strong right arm.

"Best get out of here," warned the fire-fighter hoarsely. "Looks like we're going to have to blast down some more of these buildings."

"Blast away, friend," Dan Mowbry told him. "Nothing can scare us any more—or touch us. But we're getting out."

In the end Dan found the *Vixen's* dingy, helped Elspeth Warren into it, took the oars and swung the little craft out into the bay. Distance was dulling the roar of the flames, now, and here the air was comparatively clear of smoke. And yonder, out there under the stars the *Vixen* lay at anchor, with the precious lumber raft looming a dark bulk at her stern.

They turned over Cap'n Zeke's own cabin to Elspeth Warren and left her to strip her sodden clothes away and muffle herself from chin to toe in soft, warm, woolen blankets. Then they brought her hot coffee, spiked with whiskey and told her to rest and sleep, if possible.

In his cabin, Dan Mowbry changed to dry clothes, then told his story to Cap'n Zeke. "The hand of the Almighty was in it somewhere," declared Cap'n Zeke Blood soberly. "Especially your finding the lass and getting her to safety, Dan, lad. Paul Humphrey is gone, you say?"

Dan nodded. "A blazing wall, falling, caught him. At the last I think the man was crazy. He ran right into the flames."

"Evil destroys itself," mused Cap'n Zeke piously. "Just as Bolivar Tyson's unscrupulous ruthlessness destroyed his lumber yards, through the hand of Paul Humphrey. I suppose you realize what will be the worth now of this lumber raft of ours, Dan? For they will be rebuilding again, almost before the last ember is out."

"Yes," Dan agreed soberly, "they will. It is the way of that city, the will and spirit of it."

He grinned a little crookedly, hesitated on the word, and finally spoke it. "It's destiny!"

THE fire dwindled and died with the dawn. Daylight showed a vast, ugly, blackened scar, giving off a thinning fog of acrid smoke. But true to her indomitable spirit, this lusty city of gold, this San Francisco was already at the task of reconstruction. Men were at work clearing away embers that still glowed and smoked. The city had known fire before, almost impossible devastation. Yet always, out of the ashes, it built anew, and each time built better than before.

The sun came up and with the early warmth of it between his shoulders, Dan Mowbry stood beside the *Vixen's* pilot house and watched the city clear the smoke from its lungs, wipe the grime from its face and stir to new and splendid effort. A light step sounded beside him and a small hand rested on his arm.

He looked down at her. Her face was still somewhat drawn and wan, but a trace of its old color was coming back. Her clothes had been dried for her by the *Vixen's* cook, but they were wrinkled and bedraggled. Yet she wore them as always with her old clean, fine grace.

"You look," Dan told her, his eyes twinkling, "like a very charming little gutter-snipe."

Her hand tightened on his arm. "It was all very, very terrible. It might have been unreal—some awful nightmare. Only, no nightmare could have been that bad. What—what are you going to do now, Dan?"

"Why, Cap'n Zeke and I are going ashore and sell lumber to a city that needs it more desperately than ever before, for a price which will guarantee many things."

"Such as—"

"Your future—and mine. And many others."

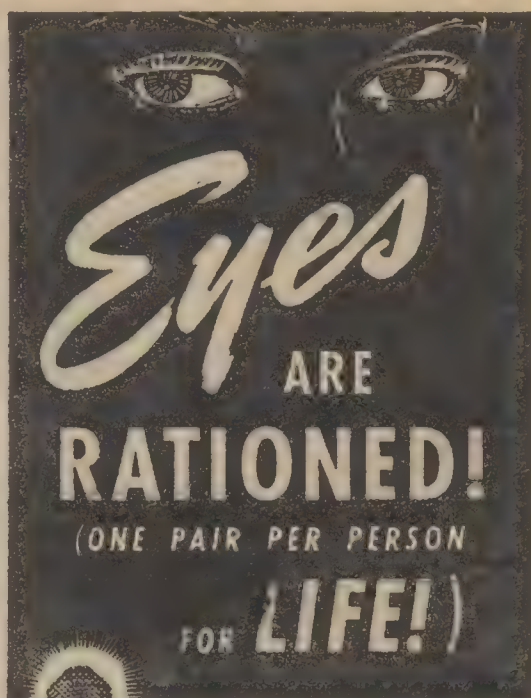
She caught her breath slightly. "I don't know what my future is, Dan Mowbry. I don't know as I even have any—but I've always longed for one in common with other people. The people who build rather than destroy—"

He took her by both small elbows, shook her gently. "As the first step—will you marry me?"

And then he knew a fright such as never before.

She searched his eyes very deeply, then smiled. She started to say something and never got the chance.

Cap'n Zeke, coming up the ladder from the cargo deck, stopped, stared, then retreated very carefully and quietly, nodding and smiling to himself.



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Hank uttered a strangled oath and went for his gun. . . .



By

JAMES SHAFFER

EMPIRE OF DEATH

Silent, grim-faced, they waited for a dead man's message—the message that could explode a peaceful valley into bloody war!

THE storm lashed at Sheriff Bob Akerson in all its fury. The wind drove the cold deep into the marrow of his bones, as his sturdy bay plowed through the drifts. He was numb when the lights of the Boxed S glimmered faintly ahead.

The big, sprawling house promised warmth and shelter from the bitter cold, but the sight of it, looking huge and silent in the eerie blackness of a snow-filled night, sent dark forebodings through the old lawman's mind.

The house reminded him of its builder, John Mack Sowder, and of the rangeland empire big John Mack had hammered together with the strength of his huge body and the drive of his iron will. That empire was a power in the country, and while he lived, John Mack had wielded that power roughly though fairly.

But John Mack was gone now—only the power remained—and now it was like an evil, tangible force roaming the countryside, leering as it prepared to strike; to bring death and destruction to a community unless it could be leashed in time.

The sheriff rode into the huge, log-constructed barn and took care of his horse. He plowed through the drifts and hammered on the front door. The lamps were lit in the big parlor, and he could see the body laid out for burial. It was if old John Mack were laid out in state.

Hu Ling, who'd cooked for John Mack since the lawman could remember, opened the door and helped him peel out of his mackinaw. His boots clumped hollowly in the big hall as the sheriff walked its length and stepped into the sitting room.

There was only one man in the room; Sheriff Akerson's own son-in-law. John Dameron had been standing with his back to the big roaring fireplace. Now he laid some papers on the table and smiled gravely at Akerson.

"Cigar?" He indicated a box on the table. "John Mack left them for the—occasion. Hu Ling's bringing hot coffee." He listened a moment to the sounds of the storm outside. "Nice night out for murder, huh?"

Akerson shivered, and it wasn't wholly from

the cold. He was wondering if John suspected the fears and forebodings that were plaguing him. He wondered if—

His lips tightened and he moved nearer the fire. He sometimes wished that Lucy had married someone he knew better; a rancher, or a shop-keeper in town. Even a cowhand—just so he was a hometown boy.

John Dameron was a lawyer. True, he was a Westerner. Grew up in Colorado, he claimed. But he'd arrived in Quatran and hung up his shingle only a year ago, to become the town's only lawyer. He'd never talked much, and even after he and Lucy were married, he'd never really opened up and told anything of his earlier life. Akerson himself lived by the code of minding his own business, but, hang it, a man liked to know a little about the man his daughter married.

Hu Ling came with the coffee, and Akerson sipped it noisily, regarding his tall, broad-shouldered son-in-law over the cup rim.

"The others ain't here yet?"

"You're the first," Dameron replied. "The storm—is it getting bad enough to keep them from coming?"

The sheriff shook his head. "They c'n make it all right." He stared moodily into the fire. "All hell couldn't keep that brood from coming tonight."

Dameron nodded. "This is the night they've been waiting for." He laughed without mirth. "And not very patiently, either."

THE sheriff grunted under his breath and walked to the big sideboard in the corner of the room. He found a bottle of whiskey and poured a generous slug into the coffee. It warmed his lean old stomach, but it failed to thaw out the cold feeling of worry that clutched him.

His thoughts raced back over the span of years he'd spent on this range. On the day he'd pinned on the lawman's badge this range had been wild. Wild and lawless—with plenty of work for a daring young sheriff to make it a decent place for folks to live. He thought of the coming of big John Mack Sowder, and how he and the big rancher had pitted their wits, their guns and their lives against the wild ones—and sometimes each other.

Peace on this range wasn't an accident, nor had it come quickly. It had been fought for, slowly and doggedly, and there had been times when it hadn't seemed worth the fight.

But peace had come, and there had been many years of it. The small ranchers had prospered during good years, and had been tided over by the bank during the lean. Mortgages and notes were extended and extended again. No man lost his home. John Mack had been president of the bank. And lately, a new breed had come into the country. Homesteaders. Farmers who tilled the soil and raised

crops that a new cow country would well use.

There had been those who had growled at their coming, who had snarled threats as their plows sliced the sod, but John Mack had welcomed the homesteaders, and they had stayed.

But what now? John Mack had left his strength to the country—but no one qualified to wield it. His wife had died many years ago, and John Mack had been too busy to raise the two young 'uns she'd borne him. A boy and a girl.

"A strange will John Mack made," Dameron broke the silence, and the sound of his voice made the sheriff start. "And he specified that it was to be read on the eve of his burial, in the same room with his body."

"Umm, yeah," Akerson said. "John had his ways, all right. What man hasn't? And a man's will is his last privilege on earth."

Sheriff Akerson was burning with curiosity to know what was in that will, and his lips were forming the question, when he stopped, frowning. His son-in-law had funny ideas about keeping confidence with his clients; even after they were dead. He'd found that out a while back, when, out of mere curiosity he'd asked about a widow's estate. The sharp answer he'd gotten still turned his face red.

"Disposing of wealth such as John Mack had accumulated, is more than a privilege," Dameron said. "It's a responsibility, and upon the man who accumulates such wealth and power, falls the responsibility of disposing of that power in such a way that it does not become a menace."

Sheriff Akerson started inwardly. It was as if John Dameron were reading his mind; reading the raw doubts and fears that were assailing him.

"I reckon John Mack knew what he was doing," Akerson grunted, trying to appear unconcerned and casual about the matter.

John Dameron nodded. "We worked the will out together—John Mack signed it today, just before he checked out," he said quietly. But the words had a queer effect on the lawman. It was as if someone had suddenly thrown a bright light into a dark corner of a room.

John Dameron still had to say in the disposing of that power! Up until now, the sheriff's mind had revolved around the two children of the man that lay in the next room; the logical heirs. But now his thoughts centered on his son-in-law.

He knew well the devious turns that the law can take, and the power a lawyer has in the disposition of a large estate. And a crooked lawyer, a lawyer thirsting for power himself. . . . He suddenly felt very tired and helpless, feeling that he was fighting forces that he could neither see nor feel.

He shook himself, cursing inwardly at his doubts and tried to remember that this was

his own son-in-law, the husband of his own daughter. And besides, John Mack Sowder had made out his own will; and John Mack had known better than any others the power he'd built up—and known the weaknesses of the children he'd raised.

But regret still nagged him. Regret that he hadn't kept closer to John Mack of late, and regret that he didn't know John Dameron better.

His thoughts were broken by the faint jingle of harness outside. They heard the Chinaman shuffle down the hall toward the front door, then heard a man outside yell for Hu Ling to come outside and take care of the horse and buggy.

"Guess that'll be Myra and Kenneth," Dameron said.

"I reckon," the lawman said with a tinge of sarcasm. "Kenneth was always a little too good to take care of his own horse."

They could hear the man calling orders at Hu Ling, then light and heavy footsteps sounded on the front porch. John Mack's daughter and her husband came down the big hall and into the living room.

"Good evening." Kenneth Molting's face, with its close-clipped mustache, showed just the right amount of sorrow, Akerson was thinking, and his voice carried just the right amount of grief. Dameron and the sheriff acknowledged the greeting.

Kenneth helped Myra with her coat. A bit faded, the coat was, Akerson thought he noticed. *But she'll be able to replace it now*, he was thinking. And Kenneth's Eastern-cut Chesterfield was shiny at the elbows, and the fur collar was rubbing thin. And the expressions on their faces were those of persons who have waited a long time for something.

"A terrible night out," Kenneth went on, "but then—we must carry out father's last wish. Only decent thing to do."

So it's "father" now, Akerson thought. Just a few months ago, it had been "that damned old tightwad," when John Mack had balked at doling out more money, and Kenneth was forced to rustle himself a job.

"We'll get it over with just as soon as Hack and two more arrive," Dameron said quietly. Kenneth's face turned cold at the mention of his brother-in-law's name. He and Henry Sowder had never hit it off at all.

He turned to Myra. "Would you like to go in the other room?" Myra nodded, and he took her by the arm, as if to support her in her grief.

Akerson felt a little ill at the show, but found his thoughts turning to Dameron's remark.

"Just as soon as Hack and two more arrive—" Akerson wondered who the other two might be.

KENNETH was closing the living room door and Akerson could hear his voice, too loud in the stillness of the big house. ". . . too easy-going with people who owed the bank money . . . when I take over. . . ."

Myra's silencing rebuke drifted back to them for a moment and Kenneth's voice died away. Sheriff Akerson caught Dameron looking at him curiously, and realized with a start that he was gripping his gun butt, and that his face must have shown what he was thinking.

He relaxed awkwardly, then growled, "That's all he married Myra for."

"Seems like a good match, though," Dameron answered. "Myra seems to be his type."

"Putting on airs—yeah—they're both good at that. He ain't never done an honest day's work in his life." He was unaware of the fact that his voice was rising. "Think he'd be the one to listen to some rancher's hard luck story. Hell!" He spat.

Dameron nodded. "I doubt if he'd know what the rancher was talking about."

Sheriff Akerson opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to know what was in that will. He could see trouble on this range, if Kenneth took over the bank—even gunplay. Kenneth was an Eastern dude, but he'd know enough to hire tough gunnies to do his dirty work. And he'd need gunmen if he planned a wholesale foreclosure of mortgages.

Another rider arrived outside, and Hu Ling padded down the long hall again. Hack, probably, but there seemed to be only one, and Sheriff Akerson knew that Hack's wife, Lilly, would surely be with him on this trip. It wasn't Hack.

Akerson's eyes bugged as he recognized the man who stepped in the living room—Roy Bellew. The man who was admittedly the leader of the nester clan that had claimed land on the fringes of John Mack's range. The homesteader nodded gravely to the sheriff, then turned to Dameron.

"This summons, it ain't my idea of a joke—if it is a joke," he said levelly. Bellew was about thirty, stolidly built, almost squat in his low-heeled, farmer shoes. His face was grave and controlled.

"John Mack Sowder specified that you be at the reading of his last will and testament," Dameron told him. "Warm up by the fire. Hu Ling will bring hot coffee."

But it was plain that Bellew was ill at ease in such elegance as John Mack's house, and that he felt out of place and puzzled at having been summoned here. He shifted his feet nervously.

"I'll go in the kitchen and git it," he said finally and left.

"That sounds like Hack now," Dameron said, at the sound of two horses outside. He glanced at Akerson, and his eyes strayed to the

door Bellew had just gone through. "Good thing they didn't meet on the trail outside, huh?"

The sheriff nodded. Hack Sowder hated the nesters, and it had been his drunken threats that had sounded louder than any other—he had sworn to drive them out "when the sign was right."

Was now the time?

They could hear Hack's drunken mouthings as Hu Ling opened the door, and Lilly's shrill voice cutting in. Lilly had learned to talk loud and shrill—in a honkytonk, before Hack had married her. Hack kicked the door open and headed straight for the cupboard where the whiskey bottle was.

"Let's git going," he grunted. "Ain't got all night. I seen Myra and that damned dude of her'n through the window—tryin' to act like they was all busted up over this." He laughed. "If that damned slick-eared dude thinks he's gonna git any of my old man's money. . . ."

"Aw, shut up," Lilly broke in. She'd gotten out of her heavy outer coat, and was swishing her frills and finery around before she sat down. "Pour me a drink—a drink, I said—not a thimbleful!"

She gulped it down and set the glass down with a thump, just as Myra and Kenneth came

back in. Hack laughed. He was dressed in old range clothes, and they contrasted strangely with Kenneth's threadbare, but fancy Eastern duds.

"Gathering around to git a morsel or two, huh?" Hack grinned.

"Hack!" Myra's voice rose shrill and shrewish.

"We want no arguments," Kenneth cut in smoothly. "Please remember the occasion, Myra."

"Damn right you don't want no argument," Hack went on, patting the gun on his hip.

Akerson could feel the tension building up in the room, and the cold feeling in his stomach grew until it gripped his muscles. Already the jackals were fighting for the power John Mack had left; already that power, an uncontrollable force, was mocking him, as it prepared to break loose in a wild frenzy of destruction.

Hack said, with gruff malice, "Remember how sore the old man was when Myra got married?"

"Really?" Kenneth asked sarcastically, and his eyes swiveled towards Lilly, a faint smile twisting the ends of his lips.

"Why, you dirty son—" Hack snarled and charged. Sheriff Akerson moved first, though. He grabbed Hack by his shirt collar and

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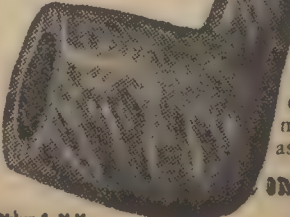
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jerked. The man went off balance and staggered backwards.

"I'll pistol-whip you, you try any of that," Akerson said bitterly. Hack jerked free with an oath, but made no move toward Kenneth.

"What the hell's the squabbling about?" Lilly demanded. "Old John Mack left plenty for all of us.

"Oh, let's get this over with," Myra broke out. "This is awful—and Dad—"

"Yeah," Hack grunted. "She's right, what th' hell we waiting for now, Dameron?"

Dameron cocked an ear to listen to the sound of another rider outside. "I think we're ready to start now," he said, undisturbed. "As you all know, the will is to be read in the room where John Mack lies awaiting burial. Let's go in."

Sheriff Akerson was looking at Dameron closely. So far, his son-in-law had appeared undisturbed and calm, but now he detected a faint nervousness in the man. Long years of gauging men sharpened an old law dog's senses, and Akerson sensed that Dameron was trying to keep some inner nervousness from showing. He'd seen men act that way—just before they broke the law.

"I'll be damned!" This came from Hack, and Sheriff Akerson whirled around. Roy Bellew had just come in from the kitchen. The nester's face was white and drawn, as he looked at Hack.

"Hello, Sowder," Bellew said quietly.

Hack pointed his finger at him. "I don't know why you're here, but I'm damned glad you are—I can give you plenty of warning. Git off this range! He whirled to face the sheriff. "And that tin badge of your'n won't stop me, Akerson. The old man was bigger than you any day, an' I aim to take over where he left off!"

"You'll have to prove that to me, Hack," Akerson said coldly, but his outward confidence didn't match the sinking hardness within him. Hack was wild, and he was crazy, and he'd been running with a wolf bunch since John Mack had kicked him out. Hack would have plenty of friends to side him.

Hack started to blare out an answer, but the door opened, and the latest arrival came in.

SHERIFF AKERSON was beyond being surprised now, and didn't bat an eye when Jeff Roberts, who'd run the bank for John Mack, came in. Jeff was short and fat, and his cheeks were cherry red from the cold. He grinned a lot, did Jeff, but his pudgy, friendly face was serious tonight. He slipped off his coat and rubbed some warmth into his hands.

"All right, let's go," Dameron said, and led the way into the big front room. This room was chilly compared to the living room, and

an involuntary shiver ran through the little group as they filed in and took their seats.

Akerson watched Hack and Roy Bellew. Hack's bloodshot eyes were fixed on Bellew with a thinly masked hatred. Akerson was thinking of the time Bellew had whipped Hack in a street fight. Hack wouldn't forget that, and he wouldn't rest until he'd evened the score, fairly, or unfairly.

Dameron was getting some papers out of his case. Jeff Roberts walked over and looked down at John Mack.

"He don't look tired no more—like he'd been looking the last few months," Jeff said. "Hu Ling said the end was easy; said he just slept right off into the big roundup—right at three o'clock."

Something clicked in Sheriff Akerson's mind, and his eyes swiveled quickly toward Dameron. The lawyer's face was strained and white, and when he caught Akerson watching him, he fumbled some papers nervously, and dropped them on the floor. He bent to pick them up, and as he straightened, the sheriff noticed the perspiration standing out on his forehead.

And the room was chilly.

For a moment, the eyes of the two men locked, and each read what the other was thinking. Dameron hadn't left town that day early enough to reach the Boxed S before three o'clock. Dameron had said earlier, Akerson remembered, that John Mack had signed the will that afternoon—just before he died. Why had he lied?

Hack said impatiently, "Let's git this over with."

But Akerson scarcely heard him—he was watching his son-in-law intently, and he sensed that Dameron was avoiding his gaze; afraid to glance his way any more. The sheriff knew he should stop this act before it went any farther; he should go over and investigate that will before the lawyer started reading, but something held him back, and before he could make up his mind, Dameron started reading.

"My wealth is contained in two principal holdings," Dameron read slowly, and his voice had an eerie quality. It was as if old John Mack himself were speaking. "The Boxed S ranch, and the Cattleman's Bank. I have two children, and since neither of them is able to provide for her- or himself, or married a partner who was capable, I must forego my intention of leaving my wealth to charity, and provide for them."

Dameron stopped for breath, and Akerson shot a glance around the room. Kenneth's face was red, and he was biting his lip. Myra's eyes were fixed on the toe of her shoe. Lilly was gazing defiantly at the rough pine coffin, and Hack was grinning sickly. Bellew and Roberts stared stonily at nothing.

Akerson felt a surge of hope. Maybe old John Mack was just leaving enough to get by on.

"To my daughter and her husband, together, I bequeath and bestow my holdings and interest in the Cattleman's Bank."

Hack uttered a strangled oath. "You dam' four-flusher," he snarled at Kenneth, "you musta been coming out here soft-soaping the old man lately. I'll—"

Akerson bellowed an order at Hack, but it was Lilly who quieted him. Her heavily ringed hand smacked loudly across his mouth. He wheeled on her, but she stood her ground, and he slumped back in his chair, mumbling. Akerson had to hand it to her—she'd learned in a hard school, but she knew how to handle her man.

"To my son and his wife, I bequeath and bestow the Boxed S ranch."

"Always did like this house," Lilly giggled. Akerson had heard enough. He got to his feet and started for the door. He was going to have that will investigated and if Dameron had pulled anything funny. . . .

"Both bequests are governed by the following provisions," Dameron went on loudly.

"I figured there'd be strings on it," Lilly said bitterly.

"The Boxed S has been heavily mortgaged to the Cattleman's Bank, but—"

Sheriff Akerson saw the action start, but he was half turned around, and before he could turn, it was all over. Hack came to his feet, his gun clearing leather, screaming curses at Kenneth. The thundering roar of the lone shot filled the room, and Hack staggered back, gripping his gun hand, his six-gun clattering across the floor.

A thin wisp of smoke curled from the Colt in Dameron's hand. In the dead silence that followed, the click of that gun coming to full cock again seemed somehow louder than the actual shot.

"Sit down, Hack," Dameron said quietly, "and we'll continue. But by diligent work," he continued reading from the will, "this mortgage can be paid off in three years." The lawyer turned to Kenneth Molting. "My daughter and son-in-law get my interest in the bank—only after agreeing to make Jeff Roberts president of the bank with full authority to foreclose—or extend mortgages."

Kenneth started to protest, and Sheriff Akerson felt like laughing out loud. Hack was muttering under his breath, but there was a new, and strange light in his wife's eyes, a light that Akerson didn't understand at the moment.

Dameron called for silence.

"The last provision of the will reads," he said sharply, "the four hundred acres of land, known as Indian Basin, goes to Roy Bellew,

to be used by him for building an irrigation dam."

KENNETH and Myra were getting on their coats for the trip back to town. Sheriff Akerson went to the cupboard and took out the bottle. Outside the storm howled, but now it seemed to the lawman to have a gleeful note. Kenneth was talking to Myra.

"Of course I'll have to make Jeff president—abide by the will, if we want that trip back East in the spring."

Akerson let a big drink gurgle down his throat. *That's right*, he thought, *git on back East where you can put on your dude airs*. He set the bottle down and Hack came in and started for it.

"Oh, no you don't," Lilly said shrilly, following him into the room. "You're sobering up and going to work! I got a chance to live in a big house like this, and I ain't letting no drunken bum like you cheat me outta it!"

Hack set the bottle down and retreated toward the kitchen, Lilly following him. Akerson picked it up again and passed it to Jeff Roberts and Roy Bellew. Jeff was grinning again, and the scared, haunted look had gone out of Bellew's eyes.

The sheriff said good-by to everybody as they left, but he did it mechanically. His mind was on other things . . . Kenneth and Myra had the money they needed to live in their world of good manners and pretense . . . Hack would go to work—if only to shut Lilly up. Hack would be far too busy to tackle a job like running the nesters out. The bank was in good hands and the nesters would continue to prosper.

Dameron came into the room, and started getting into his coat. "Lucy's expecting me back tonight," he said. "If you're riding in, we'll ride together."

They were in the barn, in the dim light of a lantern before either spoke again. The sheriff heaved himself into the saddle, then eyed his son-in-law.

"What was that stuff about John Mack aiming to leave his wealth to charity?"

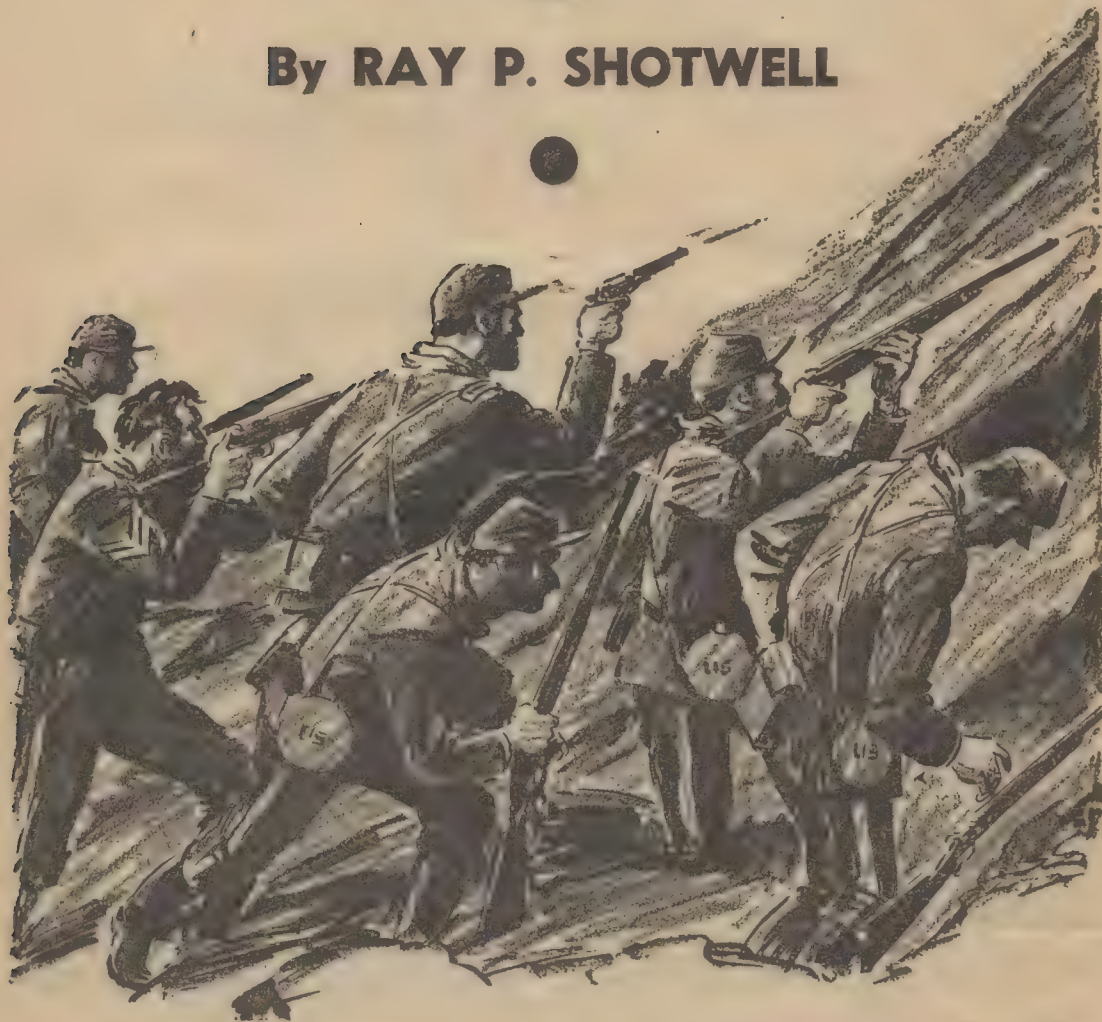
"He intended to," Dameron said. "But that will could have been broken, even if he'd lived to sign—" He broke off, looking his father-in-law in the eye. "Well?" he asked softly.

The sheriff thought of the years of peace this range had enjoyed, and the years of peace that were to come. The power that John Mack had built up was leashed; held in check. He headed his horse out into the storm.

"Son, I've knowed John Mack Sowder longer than anybody in the country—seen him write his name a thousand times. If anybody ever tried to question that will or that signature—hell! they wouldn't git to first base!"

THUNDER ON THE MESA

By RAY P. SHOTWELL



CHAPTER ONE

Ghost Guns

THERE was the heavy smell of coffee and bacon in the air and mingled with this, the strong odor of the stables on the far side of the parade grounds. The late afternoon sun blazed down onto the baked surface of the parade, reflecting on white-washed adobe barracks, bleaching the flag hanging limply from

the gaunt and dusty pole outside headquarters.

This heat dried up the pores of the skin, and gave the face a parchment-like appearance. Trooper Cass Bricker had noticed this his first day in the town of Harrison, when he'd seen enlisted men in jaunty blue jackets, gold-striped pants, and forage caps strolling in the streets.

With his tick under his arm, Cass Bricker walked without haste toward the stables. A squadron of men in fatigues came past him



Flame broke out on the
mesa rim. . . .

*When Death creeps by night on a
scalp-crazy foray—sometimes a
weakling turns into a man!*

"Damned hot country," the sandy-haired trooper grinned. "You fry in the daytime and you freeze at night. If you live through that, some damned sneaking Apache comes up behind you on patrol, and slips a knife between your ribs—neat, no mess."

Cass Bricker smiled, and the smile took some of the hardness, some of the bitterness, from the blue of his eyes. He was black-haired, with a solid jaw and a deep cleft down the middle of it. His hands were big, square-cut, with powerful wrists and strong fingers.

"Where'd they put you?" the trooper asked next.

"Company A," Cass told him. He had his bedding filled with the straw now, and he stood up, shaking it down, feet planted firmly on the stable floor, a little apart, standing six feet two in his boots. The sandy-haired trooper rubbed his chin admiringly, being on the small side himself.

"Company A," this man murmured. "You watch Moynihan, my friend."

Cass nodded without emotion. They had one in every barracks, and Moynihan was the one in Company A. He already knew about Moynihan.

"He's tough," the trooper grinned. "Especially on new recruits."

"We'll see," Cass Bricker said, and that was all. It was the way he said it that made the sandy-haired trooper stare at him curiously.

from stable duty, and several of them stared at him curiously. He was new to Fort Hemley, having been sworn into the service thirty minutes before, and already he was feeling better. The army took care of its own the way a mother hen looked after its chickens. You didn't have to think for yourself in the service; you could let everything drift, and the world went on just the same. It was a fact that Cass Bricker appreciated.

A trooper with sandy hair was in the stables, shoveling manure, when Cass came in. He looked up, pushed the shovel a few more times, and then said casually, "New man?"

"That's right," Cass said. He was big as he squatted down before a pile of clean straw and filled his tick. No one had to tell him what to do—he'd been in the service before. For five years he'd ridden against the Sioux, many hundreds of miles to the north.

"You've been around," he said. "Service?"

"Yes," Cass admitted. He threw the tick over his shoulder, nodded to the trooper and headed for the stable door. Rows of chestnut horses stood in the stalls along the way, and he glanced at them with an appreciative eye.

In the beginning, Beth said she'd liked horses, but that had been a bluff also.

A woman that don't like horses—he thought, and then he bit off the thought angrily, remembering that he'd enlisted in the service to forget, and already he was remembering.

THE heat hit him again as he walked along the board sidewalk, down the left side of the parade grounds, past the quartermaster's storehouse. The flag still hung limply from the sixty foot pole in front of headquarters building. Somewhere in the distance the post band was practicing, and then a detail of a dozen men came through the open gate at the west end of the fort, and trotted toward the stables, horses sweat-stained, the men spiritless. The heat of Arizona did things to man and beast—and what heat couldn't accomplish the constant, silent, deadly threat of the Apaches out there in the brush did.

Cass watched the patrol trot past him, noticing their faces—the tightness in them—something that would linger for several hours even after they were back in the safety of Fort Hemsley. He'd seen this same expression on the faces of enlisted men in the north country after they'd come back from a skirmish with the fighting Sioux or Cheyennes. It wasn't fear, it was an awareness of grave danger—a tension. It tied up a man's stomach; it showed in his face and in his eyes; it made him jittery, jumpy—a hellion.

Far across the parade grounds, Cass could see the small adobe structures with the piazzas on each one of them. This was Officer's Row. White-clad figures stood or sat on these piazzas, and even at the distance Cass Bricker could hear the tinkle of a woman's laugh.

He went on then, turning into a long, low adobe shed which served as the barracks of Company A. It was dark and cool inside, with its floor of rammed earth and continuous rows of double bunks along the wall, each footed by a locker and rack for equipment. There were tables and chairs, sabers hanging at the foot of bunks, carbines racked on one wall.

"Close that damn' door," a man growled from across the room.

Cass closed it. There were small windows in the building, but they were shaded with oil-cloth to keep out the sun and hot air. Heat was an enemy in this country, as much to be feared as the Apache himself, as deadly as the cold and snow had been in the Sioux country during the winter months. During the dry season, troopers with empty canteens had had

tough times getting back to the post. Spring after spring dried up—and only the Apache and the tough wild steer knew where to find water.

Cass Bricker picked out an empty bunk, walked over to it, and dropped the tick into it. A card game was going on over in one corner; other men sat on bunks, cleaning carbines, polishing boots, watching him warily.

Much of the talk had stopped when the new man came in, and it was picked up very slowly. The trooper who had made the remark sat with his back toward Cass Bricker. It was a broad back with a thick, red neck, a round head, topped with reddish-brown hair.

The redhead swung a big shoulder to give Cass a cold stare. In the dim light Cass could make out heavy, bulldog features, thick lips, and light, colorless streaks of eyebrows. Beyond a shadow of doubt this was Moynihan, barracks bully of Company A.

A lean, thin-faced man in his forties, with the chevrons of a sergeant, got up from an end bunk and walked toward Cass. The man had a half-moon scar on his right cheek, running from the eye to the corner of the mouth. His eyes were bright blue, like pieces of glass.

"Sergeant McCabe," he said quietly. "You're Bricker?"

Cass Bricker nodded. He accepted McCabe's hand and discovered it was very strong. "Not much we can tell you," McCabe said. "You know the ropes."

Cass smiled faintly. They all noticed that the first thing. When a recruit signed up he was usually full of questions. Life at a frontier post was a bewildering experience to a man who had never served before. Thus far Cass had asked nothing from anyone. He'd secured his tick at the quartermaster's store room. His outfit would come from the same source.

"Things pretty warm here?" Cass asked the sergeant. He noticed that the others were listening in—even Moynihan at the poker table.

"Broken Hand Apache Reservation is six miles to the south," Sergeant McCabe said. "Sometimes they're on it, and sometimes they're not. I'd say, mostly not."

"Especially," a man murmured from a nearby bunk, "when they got their bellies full o' liquor."

Cass Bricker's eyebrows lifted. So the trade was here, too.

"Somebody's running it in," McCabe observed, "and making a nice fortune for himself. The Apaches used to drink mescal until this chap moved in with the real thing. They were pretty bad before; now they're devils from hell."

Cass nodded. This was an old story in Indian affairs, and the blame was not entirely

the red man's. Hopped up with bad whiskey, young bucks would skip the reservation, raid, pillage, and kill until they had sobered up. They would sneak back to the reservation, then, feigning ignorance of any disorder.

Moynihan turned around from the table again, rested one big arm on the back of the chair and grinned.

"Come to fight Injuns, my friend?"

"That might be," Cass agreed. It was the one thing he hadn't come to do. Indians—Apache or Sioux—were incidental. He wanted to forget; he wanted to drop all responsibility in this life, lose himself if possible, and the service could do that for him. Many escaped convicts, men with bad reputations, men who had walked out on their wives, had found a haven on the frontier with the cavalry.

"I can see Apache squaws kickin' your head around," Moynihan chuckled, "like a football. You know they do that, mister?"

"It looks," Cass told him softly, "as if they'd done that to yours not a little, my friend." He heard a man laugh from the other end of the barracks, and the three men at the table with Moynihan grinned outright.

Moynihan smiled, very patiently, knowingly.

"Now," he murmured, "we'll see about that." He turned his back again, and Sergeant McCabe went on with his talk.

"Quite a bunch of Rondeau's braves skipped the reservation altogether. They're hiding out in the Ghost Mountain country—been there the past year or so. We've lost seven men in two months."

CASS BRICKER sat down on the bunk and took off his shoes. Renegade Indians loose in rough mountain country, which they knew like a man knows the corners of his own living room, meant only one thing—patrols riding into the mountains, searching out the canyons, exploring every mesa—and sometimes riding into ambushes set by small, wiry men with faces like devils, who disap-

peared like wraiths into the landscape when pursued.

It meant, too, a vain attempt to safeguard hundreds of miles of frontier—ranches, nesters' settlements, isolated outposts, all of them clamoring for protection from the marauders.

McCabe said, as if reading his mind, "Rondeau and his boys pick off a sentry here and there, or they waylay the mail-carrier." He paused, and then went on grimly, "The more whiskey goes into the reservation, the stronger Rondeau becomes. If it keeps up, the agent over at Broken Hand will be living there with his wife—alone!"

"Any idea who's running the stuff?" Cass asked.

"Colonel Holt would give his right arm to know," McCabe muttered. "Others have given more."

Cass Bricker had one more question. In the north whiskey smugglers had been recompensed with valuable furs or buffalo robes. The Apaches were notoriously poor people.

"What's in it for this chap?" he asked the sergeant.

"Silver," McCabe explained. "The Apaches won't reveal where they've located the lodes, but this is silver country, and they can turn up with it whenever they want to."

Cass slipped into his uniform, and then rearranged the few articles he'd brought along from civilian life—razor, comb, hairbrush—the little that was left from the mess that had been.

Sergeant McCabe watched him shrewdly as he examined the Springfield issued to him by the quartermaster. Cass broke the gun and studied the breechblock thoughtfully. When he looked up, McCabe was moistening his lips.

"Custer's boys had a little trouble with those guns up at the Little Big Horn," McCabe observed. "Damn shells were sticking in the block. While they were trying to dig them out the Sioux rode over them."

Cass nodded. He'd been with the Seventh

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that bloody June afternoon when Gall, Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull wiped out a good portion of General George Armstrong Custer's proud Seventh Cavalry. He'd worn a lieutenant's bars on his shoulder straps that spring, and he'd been with Major Reno a few miles from the Little Big Horn battlefield; Sioux riders had had them pinned up on a ridge while the main body slaughtered the Seventh.

"Army Ordnance is bringing out a lot of new Spencer Repeaters," McCabe said.

"I like that Henry rifle," Cass Bricker told him.

He got up and walked to the door, this time going outside and closing it. He stood in the sun, blinking, feeling the heat, catching again that familiar smell from the stables. Beth hadn't liked the army, but she'd only found that out after they were married, which, Cass Bricker thought bitterly, was a hell of a time.

A company filed out of K stables far across the parade grounds, and came down the street sharply, guidon waving from a pole affixed to the stirrup socket of the guidon corporal's stirrup. The company band was playing a stirring march tune in the practice hall.

Cass Bricker listened to the music, watched the guidon thoughtfully, and then looked up at the American flag drooping from the masthead. The door opened behind him, and McCabe came out.

He pulled his forage cap over his eyes and said quietly, "Why didn't you try to get your commission, Bricker?"

Cass smiled. "You know me?"

"No," McCabe said. "But I know you're not an enlisted man—at least you weren't before."

"Let's let it ride like that," Cass said.

McCabe shrugged. "You'll be so busy holding onto your hair at this post that you won't have time to think about what you were."

Cass Bricker grinned mirthlessly. "I signed up for action."

"You'll get it."

CHAPTER TWO

Fight

COMING back from the mess hall an hour later, Cass entered the barracks. It was much cooler now, and the windows and door were open, letting in the night air. Several poker games were going on in the big room; other men sat or lay on their bunks, grinning, watching him.

Cass Bricker's jaw twitched. He went straight to his locker at the foot of his bunk. His razor had been taken from the black leather case, and it was lying on the top of the locker. Cass picked it up and studied it casually. The blade had recently been

sharpened, but it was completely ruined now—the surface covered with nicks. Somebody had been cutting wood with it, deliberately destroying it.

Cass put the razor back in the blade, conscious of the fact that half the men of Company A were watching him, deliberating on his next move. Moynihan sat with his back to Cass, big shoulders heaving in laughter. There was little doubt the redhead was the guilty party.

Sergeant McCabe stood near the cold potbelly stove in the center of the room, rubbing his hands, frowning a little, his eyes on Cass Bricker.

Without a word, Cass walked across the barracks floor to Moynihan's bunk. He'd seen the big redhead sitting on the bunk just before mess call. The door of Moynihan's locker was ajar.

Sergeant McCabe's eyes widened as Cass took Moynihan's razor from the locker, stepped over to where the enlisted man's saber was hanging, and slashed it a half dozen times against the back of the scabbard.

Moynihan heard the sound in the stillness. He swung around from the card table, half-coming to his feet, jaw thrust out. Cass Bricker placed the razor back in the locker and walked over to his own bunk. He saw the expressions on the faces of the enlisted men.

"Why you—," Moynihan grated.

"There'll be no fighting here, Tim," McCabe said tersely. "You'll end up in the guard-house."

"We'll have our day," Moynihan promised. He gave Cass Bricker a grim smile and turned back to his game.

"You're in for it, friend," a trooper in the bunk next to Cass's whispered. "Better stay out of Harrison tomorrow night."

Cass Bricker nodded. "Where will Moynihan be?" he asked.

The trooper grinned. "Roxie Lane's hotel," he said. "The boys like her bar."

"Roxie Lane," Cass murmured. "Woman hotel-keeper?" He learned more about her the next day from Sergeant McCabe, and without asking. He was not interested in women, but McCabe told him, anyway, as they scrutinized the new stock just sent in to the post.

"Bob Lane built the hotel," McCabe explained, "and was doing good business in Harrison when he married Roxie. Rondeau and his boys wiped out the Harrison stage about a year ago, three miles on the other side of Benville Gap. Bob Lane was on that stage. They had to bring him back in a bag."

"Pretty tough," Cass said. He knew he was going to see a woman soon to whom

real tragedy had come. This Lane girl, carrying on the hotel which had been left to her, had loved the man who'd met his death. Love had long since been dead in Cass's own life—ever since that Chicago-bound train leaped the track at the top of Sloan Hill.

Cass got a look at the Arizona House that night at eight o'clock when he rode into Harrison. He saw the words, ROBERT LANE, PROPRIETOR, painted beneath the sign. This hotel was Bob Lane's tombstone.

Harrison was a town of one dusty main street, with a half dozen intersections. It began in the desert and it petered out on another expanse of wasteland. The Spanish Mountains formed a backdrop against which these cardboard houses were thrown, some of them two-story, but most with false-fronts; one story frame shacks, housing the saloons and gambling houses frequented by cowpunchers from the neighboring ranches, or troopers from the post.

The Arizona House was two stories high, occupying the main corner. There was a veranda running the entire length of the building, and a balcony erected on top of the veranda. A half dozen men lingered in the shadow of the veranda, and Cass Bricker spotted the U. S. army horses at the hitching post. Four of them were from Company A, the black horse troop.

Cass went up on the veranda and pushed his way into the lobby. The bar was directly off the lobby, to the left. A woman sat on a high stool behind the desk, and she looked at him quizzically as he came in. Her hair was auburn, the eyes gray and quiet. She had a strong chin, which was an unusual thing in women.

Cass would have passed her by, but she stopped him by closing the book in front of her and facing him directly.

"If there's to be any fighting tonight, Mr. Bricker," she said without emotion, "I would prefer that you take it out in the barn."

Cass smiled. Undoubtedly, she knew most of the troopers who frequented the Arizona House, and he was a new man—the man who had crossed Tim Moynihan's path. She would have heard of that.

"Moynihan here?" Cass asked.

"A man's a fool to fight with Moynihan," Roxie Lane observed. "He lives on it."

"A hard living," Cass said, and saw a frown come into her face.

She was shaking her head as he walked into the bar room. It was not big in comparison with some of the bars Cass had been in. Two bartenders sweated on the other side of the counter. There were at least a dozen troopers in the building, most of them from Company A. Moynihan stood with this group, grinning a little, very sober, very cool.

He came over as Cass was having his glass of beer, the grin still painted on his wide face. Cass Bricker saw three troopers move out the side door, and then two more followed him. He had an idea where they were going. Moynihan had set his men up before in the barn behind the Arizona House.

"This," Moynihan mocked, "is an unexpected pleasure. I didn't figure you'd have the nerve to come in here, Bricker."

"I'm here," Cass told him. He sipped the beer, taking only a very little of it, and watching Moynihan's fists. They were big, with heavy knuckles, a growth of brown fuzz on the back of them.

"That side door," Moynihan said, "leads to the barn, my friend. Company A has a little reception for you."

Cass Bricker dropped a dime on the bar and walked toward the door. Looking into the hotel lobby, he could see Roxie Lane watching him through the open doorway. He went out into the stableyard behind the Arizona House, and saw the square patch of yellow light from the barn door.

FIVE troopers in short blue jackets and forage caps were standing in the barn when he entered. They looked at him uncomfortably, but no one said anything.

Calmly, Cass unbuttoned his own jacket, slipped it off, and then peeled off his shirt. He heard a man murmur something across the room—stripped for battle he looked like Moynihan's match. Shoulder and bicep muscles rippled when he moved his arms. His waist was not narrow, but there was no fat around it.

Other men were coming into the barn, taking positions around the cleared space. Several more lanterns were lighted and hung up on wooden pegs in the timbers. All of the spectators were not troopers. Cass spotted several cowpunchers, and a well-dressed man who could have been a rancher. This man, a cool grin on his handsome face, leaned against one of the stable timbers, a cigar in his mouth.

He studied Cass Bricker with pale blue eyes, under lashes and brows burned almost white by the sun; his hair beneath the black, flat-crowned sombrero was yellowish.

"I have twenty-five dollars on the new chap," the man called suddenly.

Cass turned around and gave him an appraising glance. He was as tall as the trooper, but not as heavy. A clean-cut, well-kept man—as well as a man who liked to back his opinions.

"I'd like five of that, Fay," a trooper mumbled.

"Twenty left," Fay grinned. "Who'll have it?"

Two other troopers from Company A took

the bet. Cass Bricker threw his jacket over his bare shoulders and sat down on an empty crate. Still Moynihan did not appear.

Sergeant McCabe's thin face materialized out of the darkness behind the patch of light in the stableyard. He came in, frowning a little, but saying nothing. These men were off duty, and their time was their own.

"Moynihan run out?" Cass asked him quietly. He heard the short laugh from one of the troopers, and the smile on the rancher, Fay's, face widened. He knew the reason for Moynihan's delay. The big trooper was deliberately taking his time, hoping to make his man nervous. It was an old stunt—one Cass had seen pulled many times in the fights at the northern posts.

"Somebody run over," Cass said, "and tell him to either get here quick, or crawl back to the post."

The three troopers who had bet on Moynihan began to look a little sick. Sergeant McCabe came over and squatted down next to Cass.

"He's got a nasty habit," McCabe said, "of catching a man's head under his one arm and bashing in the face with his free fist. You'll watch that."

"I'll watch it," Cass said.

Moynihan came in then, the smile gone from his bull-dog face. He stripped off his jacket and shirt without a word. He was a brute of a man; muscles bunched around shoulders and arms capable of flooring an ox.

"All right, bucko," he said grimly. "I figured you'd be runnin' out of this."

"I'd be here," Cass told him, "till hell froze over." He knew how to fight this man. Moynihan was too strong for him, and also too slow. Moynihan depended upon getting in close to his man and smashing at him till he collapsed.

Cass circled the Irishman easily, fists doubled, watching carefully. He heard Sergeant McCabe say flatly, "Everybody stay back and give them plenty of room."

Cass grinned a little. McCabe, with the practiced eye of a soldier, had diagnosed his plan of battle, and was insisting that they have room to maneuver.

Moynihan charged very suddenly, moving faster than Cass had thought he could. Moynihan's right fist flashed through the air, and Cass Bricker went under it. He brought up his own left, smashing it full to Moynihan's stomach, stopping him abruptly.

The big trooper belched, a little beer coming up with it, trickling down his chin. Cass leaped in before he could recover and hit him three times in the face with his fists, each blow cutting.

Moynihan cursed and lashed out with his right again. Blood coursed down his right

cheek from a bad gash under the eye. Cass Bricker crouched a little, still circling, eyes bright. This thing he liked because it helped him to forget other matters. He was living again now, living dangerously, not stumbling along like a sick cow.

He went in at Moynihan, not giving him a chance to get set. He hit the man in the mouth with his left fist and was swinging his right when Moynihan's left caught him in the ribs. The punch was short, but it carried much of Moynihan's bulk with it.

Cass Bricker staggered, dropping his guard for an instant, and then Moynihan stepped in and hit him full on the jaw with his right. Cass felt the stable floor come up and hit him in the head. He rolled over on his back and tried to lift his head. The interior of the barn was spinning very rapidly, and there was a ringing sound in his ears.

After a while this stopped, and he could see Moynihan panting a few yards away, blood dripping from his chin.

"That should do it," the Irishman grunted.

Cass Bricker got up on his knees, and then to his feet. He saw the surprise in Moynihan's eyes as he came in. Moynihan swung for his jaw and missed when Cass pulled his head back. The Irishman lost his balance and tumbled forward.

Cass lashed at him grimly with both fists, beginning to recover his strength now. He didn't give Moynihan time to get set, but pushed him relentlessly, hitting out from all angles.

The big trooper went down to his knees, but got up immediately, lashing with those powerful arms. Cass stayed away from him then, circling again, wearing his man out, hitting whenever Moynihan dropped his guard. He backed the trooper against a post on one occasion and hit him six times without a return.

His face bloody, Moynihan went down on the floor, shaking his head in disgust at his own weakness. Sergeant McCabe stepped forward then and helped the big man to his feet.

"You got enough, Tim," he said quietly. "We'll go back to the post."

Moynihan broke away from him, and Cass thought he wanted to resume the fight. But the big trooper came over with his hand extended, a broad grin on his smeared face. Cass Bricker shook the big man's hand, surprised at this trait in Moynihan.

"Anybody you can't whip in this outfit," Moynihan said, "send 'em over to me, Bricker."

"I'll do that," Cass smiled. He saw Fay strolling over, fingering a number of greenbacks. He extended two of these to Cass when Moynihan sat down on a box nearby to have his face washed.

"What for?" Cass asked the rancher.

Fay smiled, his eyes narrowing till they were slits.

"Reckon you earned this, soldier. Take it."

Cass shook his head. "Drop it in the Army Orphans' Box," he said. He was conscious of the fact that he didn't like this man, but he wasn't sure why—except that Fay reminded him of another man.

Fay shrugged and walked through the door. Cass looked at Sergeant McCabe who was working on Moynihan's face with a damp rag.

"Who in hell is he?" he asked the sergeant, nodding toward the door.

"Jack Fay," McCabe said, "owner of Circle F ranch up near the Broken Hand River."

"Pretty nice chap," Moynihan said through cut lips. "Kind of likes Roxie Lane."

"I don't have to like him," Cass Bricker observed.

McCabe looked up. "No," he said, "you don't, Bricker." He added, "That girl will have no rest in this world till Rondeau is dead. I can see it in her eyes. Every time we come to town she wants to know if we brought Rondeau in. She won't ask it; she won't put it in words, but that's what she wants to know."

"A hell of a thing," Moynihan grunted. "Bob Lane was a good man."

Cass Bricker moistened his lips. He said it before he knew what was coming from his mouth.

"At least she has something to work on."

McCABE didn't look up, but he grimaced slightly. He didn't say anything. Cass walked back through the bar and out into the lobby. Roxie Lane was watching him from the desk. She said as he passed, "You're pretty tough, soldier."

Cass Bricker nodded. "You don't miss anything, lady," he said.

Jack Fay strolled in from the bar then, a glass in his hand, a thin smile on his face. He set the glass down on the hotel desk and studied Cass leisurely.

"Save me from fighting a man like that," Fay murmured. "He never quits."

Cass took a cigar from his jacket pocket and lighted it. He didn't like the way Fay had moved in on this conversation, putting himself next to the girl behind the desk. It was too reminiscent of another occurrence, years before:

"You were going some place," Cass said softly. "Where was it, my friend?"

Fay's smile broadened. He finished his drink, his pale blue eyes studying Cass carefully over the rim of the glass.

"Too bad I'm not a fighting man," he chuckled and then, smiling at Roxie Lane, he went back toward the bar.

Cass puffed on the cigar thoughtfully.

"What makes you so tough?" Roxie Lane asked. She was leaning over the desk, her hands clasped, the first show of interest in her gray eyes.

"I might ask the same thing of you," Cass Bricker said.

Neither of them said anything for a moment, but she was studying him closely, and then she nodded. Cass Bricker realized she'd gotten the answer to her question from his eyes.

"I'm sorry, soldier."

"It was nothing," Cass observed, "compared to what you got." He added a bit ruefully. "And it was something I asked for."

"That still doesn't make it any easier," Roxie smiled. "Was she pretty?"

"Very," Cass Bricker scowled. He wanted to go, and he didn't want to go. He com-

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promised by walking to the cigar tray on the counter and depositing cigar ash into it. He'd noticed that Roxie's lobby floor was scrupulously clean—a rarity in this country.

"Talking about it," the girl said, "makes it easier sometimes. I've found that out."

Cass leaned against the knotty pine desk, both elbows braced against it. He stared toward the barroom and he listened to the sounds coming out of there—the small talk, the chink of glasses—quick laughter and an occasional oath.

"She came to the post to visit her sister," Cass stated quietly. "This was at Fort Lincoln, Dakota Territory. She stayed three months, and then I married her. It was a mistake."

Roxie Lane didn't say anything, but she was listening, watching the side of his face as he spoke, seeing the jaw tighten.

"I knew she didn't care for army life," Cass said, "but I thought we could make a go of it anyway. It didn't work out."

"You quit the service," Roxie murmured. "You went back East with her."

Cass Bricker nodded. "I talked her into the marriage and I thought it was my business to keep it alive. I'd been out of the service two months when she started seeing this Lamont Drew. The following winter they ran off together, heading for Chicago. Their train jumped the track eighteen miles from Chicago. Both of them were killed."

"So you joined up again," Roxie Lane said. She didn't have to ask him why. Men went out to the frontier in 1879 for two reasons—adventure and escape.

Sergeant McCabe came in with Moynihan, the big trooper's face looking as if it had been through a meat-grinder. McCabe nodded to Roxie Lane.

He said to Cass quietly, "Patrol from Company A will be going out at dawn, Bricker. Thought you'd like to be with it."

Cass smiled. He touched his cap to the girl and started for the door. McCabe looked at Roxie Lane and bit his lips.

"We'll bring him in one of these days," the sergeant murmured, "and the chap who sells the Apaches rum with him."

Roxie Lane's face didn't change. Cass noted that she lost some color, but she didn't say anything.

Outside Sergeant McCabe muttered, "It's not that she wants to see Rondeau dead, but it's knowing that Bob Lane is dead and Rondeau alive—riding around, enjoying life. That's what gets her."

"We'll run him down one o' these days," Moynihan growled.

"Not," McCabe observed, "until Colonel Holt has some lieutenants at the post who know how to track Indians." He glanced at Cass Bricker out of the corner of his eyes.

"What's wrong with them?" Cass wanted to know. They were in the saddle now and jogging back toward the post.

"Too young," McCabe said, "no experience. Most of the boys just come out of West Point, or they've been transferred from Eastern posts. The colonel sends them out on patrol an' they wander around falling for every trick Rondeau pulls on them, and he knows them all."

"Who takes us out tomorrow?" Cass asked.

"Lieutenant Underwood," McCabe told him.

"A nice boy, but Rondeau was playing with the real thing when Underwood was using toy soldiers."

CHAPTER THREE

Thunder Mesa

LIEUTENANT UNDERWOOD had twenty-five men in his patrol when he rode out of Fort Hemsley at dawn. Cass Bricker trotted beside Moynihan, watching the four friendly Apache scouts spreading out on the horizon. The sun was reddening the sky in the east; it was still cool.

"Where are we going?"

"Up along the Broken Hand Reservation," Moynihan said. "Post just got word that a few more bucks disappeared. Looks like the whiskey's goin' through there again." He shook his head in disgust. "Colonel has patrols out all the time, but the damned stuff gets through anyway."

They rode due west for more than an hour, passing groups of cattle grazing on the slopes, wearing a Circle F—Fay's brand.

Cass said suddenly, "Fay's range touch on the Broken Hand Reservation?"

Moynihan nodded. "Fay's been in this country about two years," he explained. "Seems to be doin' pretty well." He nodded toward the south where they could see a clump of white buildings backed up against a grove of trees, and then they spotted the chuck wagon on a ridge a mile ahead of them, three riders trotting along with it.

Lieutenant Underwood paused to speak with the punchers from Fay's spread. The twenty-five troopers pulled up, some of them dismounting. Cass Bricker studied the chuck wagon leisurely. He'd seen others in the north cattle country, but none of them had been as big as this.

The back of it let down to form a table for the cook who sat on the seat of the wagon, a sour-faced man with one shoulder higher than the other.

Pots and pans were hung up on either side of the wagon walls in the rear end. Cass Bricker saw the sacks of flour, the dutch oven, a sack of dried apples, stacked inside. He saw something else, looking back over the

route which the chuck wagon had taken, and this fact held his attention.

The chuck wagon had stopped, but the cook whipped up the big bays, and it started to move again. Cass Bricker watched it quietly. Lieutenant Underwood was still questioning Fay's punchers, taking no notice of the wagon.

Sergeant McCabe moved back to the waiting troopers, and then Cass Bricker edged his horse forward. He said briefly,

"Notice anything about that wagon, Sergeant?"

McCabe turned quickly. The bays seemed to be having a tough time moving it along the ridge, and the cook was cursing at them fluently.

"What's the matter?" McCabe asked, mystified.

"That wagon's carrying a damned heavy load," Cass observed. "Look how the wheels sink into that dirt."

McCabe nodded. "What do you make of it?" he asked.

"I'd like a look behind that partition," Cass said. "They're heading straight for the reservation."

Sergeant McCabe's eyes started to glisten. When Lieutenant Underwood came back, the sergeant spoke to him briefly. The three Circle F riders were trotting up toward their wagon.

Young Underwood turned to look at Cass, and then he gave his orders to McCabe. The sergeant rattled off the names of eight men—Cass Bricker and Moynihan were included in the list. These eight swung out of line and galloped after the chuck wagon.

Cass saw one of the riders look over his shoulder, and then mumble something to his companions. They watched narrowly as McCabe rode past them, coming abreast of the wagon and the driver.

"Hold it up," the sergeant ordered curtly.

The cook swore under his breath, his sallow face getting pale.

"What in hell is this?" he grated.

Cass Bricker lifted his carbine and pointed it at the man's chest. He didn't say anything, but the cook came off the seat. McCabe scrambled up on top of the wagon, cut away the ropes holding the tarpaulin, and then knocked down the board partition separating the front from the rear end of the chuck wagon.

The three Circle F punchers had stopped about twenty-five yards away. Now one of them lifted his six-gun into the air and fired three times. Digging spurs into their horses, they headed toward the ranch house. The cook watched them grimly, but he made no move, with Cass' carbine still covering him.

Sergeant McCabe leaped to the top of the wagon and waved to Lieutenant Underwood,

pointing to the three men heading back for the ranch. Cass saw the patrol swerve and take up the chase. The punchers fired several times and then went over the top of a ridge and were lost to sight.

"Whiskey!" McCabe yelled. "A half dozen barrels of it!"

He assigned two troopers to cover the cook. The remaining men spurred after the retreating Circle F riders, McCabe cleverly swinging his men toward the southwest in an attempt to cut off retreat from the ranch.

Already, Cass could see men mounting horses near the Circle F corral. He thought he saw the tall Jack Fay riding a buckskin horse—a big animal with a flowing mane.

"Too bad those boys warned them," McCabe scowled.

Several shots were fired from the ranch yard, and one trooper gasped as a slug went through his shoulder. A horse went down, catapulting a second trooper over its head.

Cass Bricker saw the buckskin horse bolting away around one of the corrals and heard McCabe's yells. He let his own black horse go and drew up to within thirty yards of Fay. He saw the rancher turn his head slightly, and could almost see the hatred in the man's eyes.

Then Fay's six-gun cracked. Cass felt the horse shudder beneath him. The animal kept going for another dozen paces before staggering. Cass cleared his boots from the stirrups and leaped forward, landing on hands and knees in the dirt and rolling over.

When he came up, Fay was already out of gunshot range, the buckskin taking him with tremendous speed across the open range.

Sergeant McCabe dismounted near Cass Bricker. He watched Fay grimly.

"Where will he go?" Cass asked.

"I think to Rondeau," McCabe said. "He must have been working with Rondeau for a long time. Every time he got a wagon load of whiskey onto the Reservation he made Rondeau stronger. Maybe the Apache was slipping him some extra silver for the favor."

"This kind of tough on Roxie Lane?" Cass asked.

McCabe shook his head. "She never had much use for him. Fay was doing all the leading."

Lieutenant Underwood came up then, his face flushed with excitement.

"Good work, Bricker," he smiled. "I'll see that you're mentioned for this."

Cass Bricker nodded. He murmured, "Thank you, sir."

THEY returned to the post with the prisoners, and Underwood made his report to the commanding officer. Cass Bricker was called to headquarters at four

o'clock that afternoon. An orderly came into the barracks with the note.

"Reckon they're gonna make him a general?" Moynihan chuckled. "Remember your old friends, Bricker."

Cass Bricker went up the gravel path to the headquarter's building, waited for a few moments in the sitting room and then was ushered into the presence of Colonel Holt.

The commanding officer of Fort Hemsley sat behind an oak desk with the company flags behind him. He was a squat man with a black, short-clipped beard and piercing black eyes. Cass saluted and then waited.

"Sit down," Colonel Holt told him. "You've done us an excellent service today, Bricker."

Again Cass dusted off his, "Thank you, sir."

"You've been in the service before," Colonel Holt said. "Where?"

"Custer's Seventh," Cass said. "Fort Abraham Lincoln." He saw the commanding officer's eyes widen.

"How long?" Colonel Holt asked.

"Five years," Cass told him reluctantly. He had an idea what was coming.

"As an enlisted man?" Holt persisted.

"I held a lieutenant's commission," Cass stated.

Colonel Holt nodded, a pleased light coming into his eyes. "I won't ask why you entered the service for the second time as an enlisted man," he said quickly. "Were you honorably discharged the first time?"

"Yes, sir," Cass said.

"You'd have seen plenty of Indian fighting with the Seventh," Colonel Holt went on. "You know the Indian mind?"

"Not the Apaches, sir."

Colonel Holt shrugged. "There's not too much difference between Indians," he observed. "If you've fought the Sioux and Cheyenne, you can fight the Apache. I'm offering you a commission at this post, Bricker. I'd like to send you out with fifty men to bring in Rondeau."

Before Cass could reply, Holt went on quickly. "Rondeau is reputed to have more men than that, but they are not in one band. He's smart enough to separate them. With fifty men you can track him down; you can move faster than a large body; you can move more silently, and you'll still have enough power to fight him when you meet."

Cass Bricker nodded thoughtfully. The plan was feasible in every respect. It was impossible to track down Rondeau with a large party because they left too big a trail, and they moved too slowly. A mobile force of fifty hard-bitten troopers like McCabe and Moynihan could accomplish much more than a full regiment.

"I can't force you to accept this commission," Colonel Holt smiled. "If you wish to remain an enlisted man that is your prerogative. The Army doesn't want leaders who would rather remain anonymous."

Cass Bricker thought of Roxie Lane back at the Arizona House, who wanted Rondeau taken; he thought of other women who would lose their men because of him. Rondeau was still lurking in the Ghost Mountains, ready to move out on an isolated ranch house, or dash from the top of a mesa after some hapless stagecoach. Rondeau was a wild dog, preying upon peaceful white settlers. Added to that was the fact that Jack Fay would be joining up with him, and Fay was as responsible as Rondeau for the murders along the border. Fay was a white man turned red for silver.

"I'll accept it, sir," Cass said. "When shall I start?"

"Choose your own time, Lieutenant," Colonel Holt chuckled. "Pick out your own men. I'd advise you to take Hank Benders along with you. He's the most dependable white scout on the border. He'll find Rondeau if anyone can."

Cass Bricker nodded. "We'll leave tomorrow night," Cass said. "The men will slip out of the fort in companies of ten and meet at a rendezvous in the hills. Rondeau won't know we're after him until we're right on his tail."

When he went back to the barracks to take his stuff out of the locker, Sergeant McCabe sat on a bunk nearby, watching him.

"You accept that commission, Bricker?" he asked suddenly.

Cass nodded. He looked around at the enlisted men, sitting in the shadows of the barracks. The door was shut again and the windows had the oilcloth drawn across them, keeping out the heat.

"Lieutenant Bricker?" McCabe asked.

"That's right, Sergeant," Cass said. He stood up. "Pick out fifty men, McCabe. I want the toughest men in the outfit. We might have to live on horsemeat before we're through. We pull out of the post tomorrow night at midnight."

The men of Company A stared at him in amazement, not quite understanding this—Moynihan was scratching his red hair, mouth open.

"Rondeau?" McCabe asked, a light coming into his bright blue eyes.

"Rondeau," Lieutenant Cass Bricker said.

THE fifty-odd troopers squatted in the doubtful shade of a rock ledge. Heat, pitiless heat, dropped down into the canyon, making every rock hot to the touch, burning the skin, heating up rifle barrels so

that a man could burn his fingers badly just by touching them.

Lieutenant Cass Bricker sat against the rock wall watching the fat roly-poly scout, Hank Benders, draw a map in the sand.

Benders said, "Here is Cochise Canyon, which we're in now. She runs maybe eight miles north, swingin' a little to the west. Then she splits up into two canyons, an' in between the two is this mesa which the Apaches call Thunder Mesa. Rondeau is up there."

"With how many?" Cass Bricker asked him through a two weeks' growth of beard.

His cheeks were lean. They'd been on the trail for a month now, following many false leads since creeping out of Fort Hemsley at night. Several times they'd located Apache encampments, and had gotten close enough to raid them, but Benders always shook his head, indicating that Rondeau was not with this group.

"Reckon I counted seventy-five wickiups," Benders said. "That makes maybe a hundred fighting men, Lieutenant."

Cass stared at the map Benders had drawn in the sand. He looked at Sergeant McCabe squatting nearby, lips parched, cracked from the heat, his skin several shades darker.

"Can we get up on that mesa?" Cass wanted to know.

Benders nodded. "High bluffs on two sides, an' a sheer drop of two hundred feet at the north rim. We can move up the south side, or we kin crawl up those bluffs an' pin 'em back again the north rim. We'll have all of 'em then, but they'll fight like cornered rats."

Cass Bricker smiled at the enlisted men nearby. Their uniforms were torn to shreds,

their boots worn through from scrambling on foot over rocky terrain, down almost impassable trails, climbing cliff walls, dragging with them their cavalry horses and thirty tough pack mules.

Cass said softly, "Our boys will relish the fight." He saw them grin, and went on, "We'll move out of here tonight," he said. "We'll split our forces when we reach Thunder Mesa." He took a cleaning rod from a nearby trooper and made a mark in the sand with it. "You'll take fifteen men up this west bluff, Sergeant," he said to McCabe. "Corporal Rose will have fifteen men to climb the east bluff. I'll go up the south entrance with the remaining force. We'll hit them at dawn."

Hank Benders was nodding in a satisfied manner. "Only one way to fight Rondeau," he chuckled, "an' that's to hit him—hard—before he hits you."

"They haven't seen us?" Cass questioned. "Not yet," Benders said, "but it's still two hours before sundown. Keep the boys back up against this ledge."

Cass Bricker listened to the talk among the troopers. Moynihan, with his broad back against the cliff wall, was cleaning his carbine with an oiled rag. Corporal Rose, a stocky man with pepper-colored hair and a huge beak of a nose, squatted among the men, checking their equipment.

Cass's right hand slipped up to the pocket of his blue flannel shirt. He felt the small piece of paper inside of it. Two hours before riding out from Fort Hemsley that note had come to the post, delivered by a rider from Harrison. It was very brief and it was signed by Roxie Lane.



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"Good luck," the note read. "Bring him in, Lieutenant."

He didn't know how she'd discovered that he was taking a patrol out at midnight to chase Rondeau, but word had leaked through to her some way. She wanted him to bring in the renegade Apache leader, and Jack Fay with him.

Cass said suddenly, "Fay with Rondeau?"

"Didn't see him," the scout told him. "Reckon he's around somewhere."

"Rondeau," Sergeant McCabe said quietly, "is supposed to know the location of one of those old Spanish claims—the richest lode in the southwest. I figure Fay will hang around, trying to horn in on this."

WITH the sun still hot in the sky, the shadows started to creep along the canyon. Cass Bricker had ordered that no fires be built. The troopers munched on dry biscuits and drank water from their canteens and watched the stars brighten overhead. Looking up from this vault, they could be seen more clearly. When the handle of the Big Dipper swung into view, two hours later, Cass gave the signal to move.

The horses and mules had been left in a drywash, two miles back in the canyon. Hank Benders and the Apache scouts moved up to the front, soon disappearing into the darkness. It was hot in the canyon, little of the cooling breeze from the roof coming down to them. Sweating troopers stumbled forward, trying to make as little noise as possible.

It was nearly midnight when Hank Benders materialized out of the darkness ahead of them. There was no moon, but the stars were quite bright. Cass Bricker could make out the vague outlines of the Mesa straight ahead of them. The slope here was gradual, and a man could go up it at a fast trot.

"Too damned much light," Benders grumbled. "I don't like it, Lieutenant."

"Hear anything?" Cass asked him.

"No," Benders said. "Don't like that, either."

Cass turned to Sergeant McCabe.

"Start your squad down the left canyon," he said quietly. "I don't know how long it'll take you to go up those bluffs. When you hear us open fire, close in as best you can."

McCabe peeled off with his fifteen troopers, and then Corporal Rose followed suit. Cass Bricker started forward with Hank Benders and the remaining men.

"Hell," Benders muttered. "Too much light to hide us, an' not enough to see where you're goin'."

"Well have to risk it," Cass told him. "We've come a long way for this." He realized that by morning Rondeau might spot

them and slip down some hidden trail off the Mesa. They might have to spend another weary month trailing him.

They moved forward two hundred yards, and then Cass gave the low order to start crawling. Benders already had dropped on hands and knees and was wriggling his way up the slope. Cass caught a glimpse of two of the Apache scouts, lank black hair bound in blue bandeaus, crawling like snakes on the ground.

Cass slid his army pistol out of its holster, heard a man curse softly a few yards away when a stone was loosened and rolled down the slope.

Benders waited till Cass came up to him. He said tersely, "An Apache can hear some-thin' like that a half mile away, an' Rondeau's wickiups ain't more than a quarter of a mile from here."

"You think McCabe and Rose are up the bluffs?" Cass asked him.

Benders shook his head. "Those boys will have to go very slow," he stated. "But they'll be right on top o' Rondeau's camp when they do reach the mesa."

"What about sentinels?" Cass asked.

"He might an' he might not have 'em out," Benders stated. "Apaches don't usually have sentinels, but Rondeau has a white man with him, an' Fay knows what'll happen when we catch up with him."

They crawled another hundred yards, almost reaching the edge of the mesa. Hank Benders pressed Cass's shoulder, and then started to go forward alone. Cass Bricker passed the signal back to hold up. He could see Benders crawling very slowly, and then the scout disappeared around a rock. He was thinking how easily Benders pulled his heavy bulk along, soundlessly, and with little effort. Then a yellow light blinked from a spot less than fifty yards beyond Benders, the rim of the mesa. There was the crack of a rifle, and then a slug whined over their heads.

Immediately, dozens of guns opened up along the mesa rim. The slugs began to ricochet off the rocks. A trooper stood up very suddenly, took a step forward, and collapsed on his face.

"Everybody down!" Cass roared. A roly-poly form slid down the slope and scrambled behind a rock nearby.

"They were waitin' for us!" Hank Benders yelled.

Cass Bricker listened carefully. The troopers with him had started to fire back at those gun flashes. They could hear the shrill screams of the Apaches up on the mesa. Acrid gun-powder smoke drifted down the slope, choking them. Another trooper moaned as a bullet struck him.

Then Sergeant McCabe's guns opened up

from the left, followed a moment later by Corporal Rose's.

"They won't get up," Benders growled. "Not with riflemen on top of them."

"Fall back," Cass ordered. He'd noticed there were more rocks and boulders strewn along the slope farther down. Up here they were too exposed to Rondeau's fire. Even in the darkness indiscriminate shooting might do a lot of damage.

"That's the end o' Rondeau," Benders muttered. "He's probably takin' his camp down one o' the bluffs up along the mesa. These bucks will hold us off until they're all off the mesa. Then they'll scoot themselves. It'll take us another month or two to trap him in a spot like this."

Cass Bricker shook his head. The supplies were already very low, and the men had been living on half-rations the past four days. If he expected to reach Fort Hemsley with his force he'd have to turn back now, or else wait up until a pack train reached him. In the meanwhile Rondeau would be moving farther and farther back into the Ghost Mountains. He'd be free to sally out against the ranchers on the west slope of the mountains; he could have his bucks patrol every road, breaking up stage coach service, massacring isolated freight outfits.

Successful in outwitting every detachment from the post, Rondeau would draw more Apaches from the reservations. He could steal more, kill more. Roxie Lane could lie awake nights in the Arizona House, thinking about that.

Rondeau had dispatched many of his braves to the bluffs on either side of the mesa, leaving less fire in the center of the line. Cass Bricker noted this thoughtfully as he retreated with his own men.

"Cease firing," he ordered. Very gradually the carbines quieted down along the line as the word was passed, but the Apaches were still shooting down at them.

TWO men who'd been hit were dragged down to safety in the darkness. One trooper had been shot through the heart and was dead; the other man had taken a bullet through the right shoulder.

"Where's the bugler?" Cass asked softly. He heard the question repeated along the line, and finally a trooper by the name of Hoffman crawled up.

"Here, sir," he said.

Cass Bricker turned to Hank Benders lying a few yards away.

"Can you get up to Corporal Rose's position? Tell him to leave two men, firing constantly from different positions. Have him report back here immediately with the rest of his command."

Benders muttered under his breath, clucked several times, and then disappeared. Cass moistened his lips and turned to Trooper Hoffman.

"Get up to that bluff where Sergeant McCabe is attacking," he said quietly. "Have him leave five men at the position, and report here with the remainder. A half hour after McCabe leaves you, blow the charge."

"The charge?" Hoffman muttered.

"That's right," Cass said, "but don't go up. Have the men make a lot of noise over at that point."

Hoffman crawled away, and Cass Bricker watched those blinking yellow lights from the rim of the Mesa as Rondeau's bucks kept up the fire. None of the troopers were returning the fire, and he knew that Rondeau would be wondering now. They would be expecting a charge from some direction, but they wouldn't know where. This uncertainty would begin to get under their skins after a while.

In ten minutes Hank Benders came back with Corporal Rose.

"How is it over there?" Cass asked.

"We have a man wounded," Rose said.

"Not badly, though. He wants to stay at his position and keep up the fire."

Cass Bricker nodded. He heard another man coming up from the opposite direction, and then Sergeant McCabe's quiet voice.

"Lieutenant?"

"All right," Cass said. "Come up."

McCabe lay down beside him. "Pretty tough," he said. "Rondeau was waiting for us, Lieutenant."

"Anybody hit?" Cass wanted to know.

"Couple of scratches," McCabe stated. "Too dark for good shooting." He waited for his orders.

"Pass the word," Cass Bricker said tersely. "We're going up when the bugle sounds. No shooting till we get up there."

Sergeant McCabe said softly, "Ah."

"We're gambling on Rondeau shifting much of his force to that left bluff," Cass went on slowly. "The bugle call will come from that direction. He doesn't know where we are now because there has been no shooting from this point for the past ten minutes." He paused, and went on grimly, "We want to clean out that mesa."

There was a clicking sound to the left where Hank Benders was inserting fresh cartridges into his six-gun.

"Any questions?" Cass Bricker asked.

"We tryin' to take Rondeau alive?" Corporal Rose asked.

"Not in this world, mister," Hank Benders said. "Try it, an' he'll take you with him."

"You have your answer, Corporal," Bricker smiled.

Five minutes passed, and then ten. Cass Bricker got up on his knees. The firing was still going on from either bluff, with Rondeau's bucks answering it.

Then it sounded, very clear, high-pitched against the rifle shots. Cass Bricker gripped the army pistol in his hand and started up the slope, running low, going as fast as his legs could carry him. He heard Sergeant McCabe panting beside him, and then Moynihan's low curse as the big Irishman stubbed his toe on a rock.

They kept going as the bugler sounded his charge, a thin, all but soundless wave of violence in the night, their hearts pounding, their breaths gasping their hatred. The men McCabe had left at the bluff were yelling now and firing rapidly.

Cass could hear a savage yell ahead, a deep-pitched roar. Hank Benders called across, "Rondeau. He's shiftin' his bucks, Lieutenant."

They were fifty yards from the rim of the mesa now, and no shots had been fired as yet. Cass Bricker was first over the rim—he'd wanted that, and felt it a good omen. He could see shadowy figures in front of him, not more than twenty yards away, illuminated by starlight.

Carbines banged along the line. Cass still kept going, squeezing the trigger of his pistol, feeling it kick in his hand. An Indian went down straight ahead of him, and he ran past this man, firing at another, seeing him stumble to his knees.

Rondeau's heavy voice sounded again from the left and Cass turned toward the sound. The troopers raced forward, firing steadily, pushing Rondeau's bucks toward the bluff.

Groups of Apaches held and tried to make stands, but they were smashed by the determined troopers. Some of them, with empty carbines, whirled the heavy guns like clubs, smashing in skulls, moving on.

A man raced out of a clump of brush, fired twice at the advancing troopers and then broke into a run toward the north end of the Mesa. Cass Bricker had caught a glimpse of a wide-brimmed sombrero.

"Fay!" he called sharply.

Jack Fay swung around. Cass had his gun in position for the shot, but Fay was quicker. The rancher's weapon roared, orange flame darting from its muzzle.

Cass felt the slug smash through his left shoulder, spinning him half around. He managed to get off a shot, and then another—the last in the cylinders. He saw Fay turn to run, and then weave crazily along for five yards before plunging forward on his face.

"Rondeau!" Hank Benders yelled.

Cass couldn't see the scout, but he saw the squat, gorilla-like figure bounding out of the

darkness straight toward him. He caught a glimpse of the ugly, pock-marked face and the fierce black eyes. He threw the empty gun into the Indian chieftain's face and heard him cry out.

He leaped forward then, grasping at Rondeau with his one good arm, catching him by the hair. He twisted his fingers into the man's black hair and tried to throw him to the ground.

Rondeau clubbed at him with an empty rifle, knocking him to his knees. Cass retained his grip on the Apache's long hair, and it was this that saved his life. Rondeau was unable to raise himself for another clean swipe with the rifle stock.

Panting like a wild animal, the Apache leaped on top of Cass, and Cass realized he was fumbling for a knife to finish the fight. Desperately, he tried to drag the Indian off—and knew he had failed.

Very suddenly, then, Rondeau was picked up, held high in the air and smashed to the ground. Cass Bricker heard Tim Moynihan's soft laugh.

"That's it, bucko," Moynihan chuckled.

Rondeau rolled over like a cat, and Cass saw the knife gleam in his hands as the Indian came up on his knees, facing Moynihan.

"Watch it!" Cass yelled.

Rondeau's arm was already back when the shot sounded from Cass's left. The Indian chieftain shuddered, his jaw going slack. The knife slipped from his fingers and he rolled over lifelessly.

Sergeant McCabe came up, an army pistol in his hand, his face tight.

"You get it, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"I'm all right," Cass told him. "Keep after them, Sergeant. We want to break this up."

McCabe disappeared, and the firing continued. Big Moynihan knelt down beside Cass and held him up.

"Won't be many of 'em left after our boys get through," the trooper grinned.

"No," Cass said. He looked at the dead body of Rondeau, and then lifted his hand to his shirt pocket and felt the slip of paper there. Aside from his army duty, he'd done a favor for a woman, and it was the first time since his marriage that he'd tried to please another woman. It was a very strange thing.

Both of them had lost much—he, and the girl in the Arizona House. Both of them had picked up the threads of the old life and were trying to weave a new pattern. Maybe he would just go back to the Arizona house—and keep going back, as the other troopers did. Maybe—

Stubbornly, he'd been telling himself that a man loves only once, and that it couldn't happen again. Now he knew in his heart that that argument was going over the hill!

MAVERICK BRAND

By
**FRANK
MORRIS**



He slashed the barrel
toward Sutter's
head. . . .

*The West was too vast for this wild
maverick rampant off the steel rails
—until a borrowed six-gun taught
him that his share of it was a fresh-
dug grave—and a hombre to put in
it!*

HE HEARD the whole argument from where he lay on the floor. But it wasn't as strong as the pain. Under his flat, scrawny shoulders he felt the hard, spurscarred boards of the lobby floor. There was that—and the pain. Beyond, there was the darkness. And sound—the excited buzz of Whitehawk's citizens throwing questions at each other faster than a troop of raw recruits on bunk fatigue. It was easy to let go of it—to slip off into the painless dark.

Old John Lang and Luke Miller, the cowboy, were waving their arms, shouting at each other, while the rest of the Lang Hotel guests

stood around in their sock feet. Sleepy-eyed and half-dressed, they were looking at Dud Niles. Someone had turned the deputy over, and now he stared up at the hanging lamp, his pale eyes already glazing.

There was a gaping, bloody hole to the left of his chest.

"You're a hammerhead, Luke Miller," John Lang was saying. "They didn't get your dinero. An' anyway, I ain't no banker. Why didn't you put your beef money in the bank yesterday—Saturday—when you had the chance?"

Luke Miller always had been a hard man to get along with. Right now, his face was the color of raw meat. Flame burned in his little eyes.

"You're talkin' through your hat," the cowman shouted. He spun around suddenly, to run back of the lobby desk and paw into the open safe. When he straightened up, he looked like a circle rider who'd just found a running iron in hot ashes. "Like hell!" he yelled. "I left that money here in two wads, tied with piggin' string. I give 'em to that wet-nose night clerk of your'n there on the floor. Now one of them rolls is plumb gone. You hear me, John Lang—gone!"

Young Hamlin, prone on the floor, closed his eyes for a moment, to let the darkness ease the throbbing pain. And in that moment it seemed he was back in the orphanage. Old Anna was bathing his lacerated back where they'd beaten him with the whip. Then he was riding the rods, out of Chicago, out of Saint Paul—out of big towns, and little ones, throwing away the miles and the years.

"Thirty days! Vagrancy."

They always said it the same way, East or West. As though he were an animal—an abomination instead of an obligation. It didn't make much difference.

That last one-horse jail had been easy to break out of, though. And the brakey, beating at his hands with a club, tossing him from the swaying boxcar, out into the middle of nowhere. Funny country for a city kid. There wasn't any end to it—like there wasn't any end to the black cloud he was groping in. Walk all day and where were you? Not a tree—not a damn thing but a lot of curious cow critters, with once in a while a big hard-jawed man riding a horse, loaded down with a six-shooter, or maybe a rifle. Not much there to go by.

One thing he'd learned—living meant *fighting*. It was no different out here than it had been in the city. Only here it was more in the open, more direct—more deadly. No matter where, men fought because they were greedy, or proud, or loyal to some duty. The things men fought for were numberless—but mostly men fought to live.

THE old boarded-up cabin on the creek hadn't been a bad place for a hungry, bone-thin kid. And those faded old levis and shirt had only needed a washing. A dab of bacon grease on the old .45 Colt made it work as good as new, too.

Maybe it had been wrong—taking the gun. The clothes and run-over boots hadn't been in much better shape than his own tattered rags. Just enough to make it worth the trade—make him less conspicuous. Nobody would blame him for that. But the gun—and wearing it the way he had, just like those punchers he'd seen out on the range. And walking right into Whitehawk, too, big as you please, to the largest building in town, bracing old John Lang for a job. That had taken guts. A flat belly will make a man do things like that.

Vic groaned. He wanted to lay there on the floor forever, to float away on that black cloud and never come back. But he sat up, lurched to his feet. His head was a great throbbing drum. The lump in his tousled, straw-colored hair was bloody when he touched it.

He thought bitterly that, as far back as he could remember, he'd always gotten such rotten breaks. But no matter what, he'd always met every bad turn of fortune, bested it with a reliance on his own fierce pride, always come back for more. The thought put iron in his spine.

Swaying there on rubbery legs, he finally got his eyes open, to stare at the men there in the hotel lobby. Some of them were in their undershirts. One of them had legged into his pants, suspenders hanging. He was a big red-faced man. Hot fire flamed in his eyes, and he held a six-gun in one big hand. He was looking at the kid, at Vic Hamlin. That would be Luke Miller, Vic was thinking.

The sudden silence was a cloud without form. It wasn't black and soft, soothing like that dream he'd had. It didn't keep the white heat of pain from stabbing into his brain. Vic pushed at it, felt it close in around him, hemming in the pain and hemming him in.

He wasn't so large, this Vic Hamlin, not over five feet seven. Nineteen, maybe. He was thin, his face chalky under the freckles, a tow-headed youngster who needed a haircut and a shave. He'd been kicked around. That could be seen right off. He looked like some slab-sided little dogie calf, all ribs and beller. That is, he did if you didn't take in the low-slung six-gun and the saddle-warped levis. Looking at those things, and his cool gray eyes, you got the idea that maybe Billy the Kid might have been like this—looked about like him a little after his first kill.

But that was just the clothes, the way the borrowed six-gun and holster hung down on his slim hips.

"How about it, you no-good coyote?" big

Luke growled. "What happened in here, an' where'n hell's my beef money? Speak up, Kid, 'fore I have you throwed in the jug for keeps. Who was the other skunk come in here with Dud Niles to dab a loop on my dinero—if that's for true? You're wearin' a cutter like you was Dead-eye Dick of Deadwood. Whyn't you get 'em both?"

"Go easy on the kid," John Lang broke in. "An' where's your thanks, nohow? Didn't Vic lay out one of 'em? They didn't get all your money, you big shote."

Lang was a bristly little oldster, gray and rawhide-lean, with a wide mustache and a stiff leg he'd got somewhere along a cowman's trail.

Vic opened his mouth, but words wouldn't come. Inside, he felt like he had the few times he'd been picked up for being on the bum. He knew it wouldn't matter what he said. Miller wouldn't believe him, anyway. Discouragement gripped him in chill hands.

"Shut up, Lang," Miller snapped. "Let him do his own talkin'. What you know about him? He's only worked for you one day. How you know he ain't in with them fellers that've been pullin' stuff like this for the past coupla weeks? Mebbe he's been planted here to size up the take. You're only takin' *his* say-so. Who seen this shootout, 'cept him? I'm askin' you."

Vic shot a hasty glance at Dud Niles on the floor, and turned away. He felt sick.

"Like I said," he told Miller. "this—this Dud feller with the deputy star, he comes in an' pulls a gun on me, tells me to open up the safe. Then this deputy grabs out that money. For a minute he wasn't watchin' me real close, so I slide out my .45 an' beat him to the shootin'."

"Go on," thundered the cowman. "What happened then?"

Vic leaned back against the lobby desk.

"Well, I was kinda scared. But I—I felt pretty good, too, Mr. Lang trustin' me that-away, showin' me the combination to the safe

—an' me bein' a stranger. I figgered I—I was glad I shot that feller, kept him from robbin' the safe. But right then I heard a step behind me. I turned around, an' here was this other jasper raisin' a big six-shooter over my head. I tried to duck. But he brought it down hard—an' that's all I remember till now."

"Who was it?" demanded Luke Miller. "Look around. Was it any of these hombres here?"

Vic let his eyes sweep the crowd. He shook his head.

"Nope. Never seen him before. But—"

Luke Miller snorted.

Then the front door opened and a big, heavy-shouldered man came clumping into the lobby. There was a marshal's badge on his vest.

"About time you was gettin' here, Loop Sutter," Lang said.

Sutter wedged roughly through the circle of Whitehawk citizens and laid his hand on Vic's shoulder.

"What's going on here?" he demanded harshly. Then he saw Dud and stepped back. "What in blazes—who done that?" His big dark eyes stared at the dead deputy, then fastened on Vic's chalky face.

"Him," Luke Miller growled, pointing at Vic. "Got some cock-an'-bull story about Dud Niles comin' in here after my beef money."

Vic stared at the marshal, gray eyes wide in his drawn face. It didn't make sense to Vic. That is, it didn't make sense unless the crazy hunch he was beginning to have was the right one. The lawman saw that intent gaze, narrowed his big eyes until they were black slits in his whiskery face.

"Anythin' you say'll be held again' you," he warned Vic.

The kid turned his face away from Sutter.

"Mr. Lang," he said, "you figger my story is true?"

"Why, shore, son. An' don't let these dang fools get you rattled. I say you done a good job, droppin' that Dud feller. For my money,



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him—an' his boss—"Lang was looking at Sutter now—"could both stand a little investigatin'."

"You want to go 'long to jail with this whelp, Lang?" snarled Loop Sutter. He jerked Vic up close to him. "Come along, gunny," he said. "Me an' you are goin' to jail, pronto!"

SUTTER closed the office door to Whitehawk's jail and motioned Vic Hamlin to a chair.

"Sit down, Kid," he said.

Vic was staring at him, wide-eyed.

"All right," Sutter went on in a low tone. "So it was me that got Miller's beef money. Go ahead, Kid. Spit it out. I won't bite you, an' these walls ain't got no ears." He was spreading an oily grin at Vic. "You downed Dud Niles—saved me the trouble, Kid. That owlhoot wanted the whole works, an' he'd've got it, too, if you hadn't plugged him. An' now, if you're as savvy as I figger you are, you'll lis'en an' do like I tell you. Get it?"

Vic nodded. There was nothing else he could do right then. Knowing the answers was one thing. But getting it across to those rugged townsmen, in a way that would convince them beyond any shadow of a doubt—that was something quite different.

Crooked lawmen were no novelty to Vic Hamlin. But out here beyond the Missouri, the breed was strange, didn't somehow tie in with what he'd heard about the West. The hope that maybe here in the wide open spaces he might find steady work and friends died in him. A wave of depression swept over him.

"You an' me, we could make a great team, Kid," Sutter was saying softly. "I aim to get Miller's dinero, see? If you help me, you'll go scot free. An' there's other easy takin's, too. We'll clean up. If Dud hadn't been a hog an' a mite thick-headed, he'd've been in on it. But I ain't no nurse. He pulled a bone-headed trick an' got his pay. An' I got some of Miller's dough in my back hip pocket."

Vic Hamlin wasn't a coward—just young and hungry and scared, tired of being kicked around.

"An' if I don't?" he asked, his bony frame taut.

"You'll stretch hemp," Sutter chuckled. "Or mebbe spend the rest of your life up to Bismark, makin' hoss-hair bridles. Miller ain't no fool. Anybody fools with his money-bags is goin' to hear about it. An' right now he's figgerin' you're in with the fellers that tried to clean him. You go all the way with me on this, an' I'll see he quits thinkin' like that."

Inside, Vic's lips curled. Maybe he did have burrs in his hair from sleeping out. But he wasn't a crook. However, a fellow mighty quick learns not to show his thoughts.

"How?" he asked.

Sutter's big eyes narrowed.

"Why, you go back to work—for Lang. Now. Near mornin', I'll come in an' we'll get the rest of Miller's wad. We split, see?"

"No."

"Yes, we do. You get a thousand, an' clear out. You can stay up to a little shack I know about in the Devil's Lake country. I'll say you got away. It'll blow over."

"An' you sit here with your badge coverin' you," Vic leveled, "an' the rest of Miller's six thousand, that it?"

"Sure," Sutter grinned. If he caught the irony in Vic's tone, he didn't show it.

VIC WALKED up the dark, deserted street like a man in a dream. His feet were heavy, his head still ached where the marshal had hit him earlier in the evening. There had to be some way out of the tight he'd gotten into, he fumed. He could leave, pull out. . . .

John Lang met him in the doorway of the hotel.

"Well, I'll be jiggered," the hotel man grunted. "That tin-star turn you loose, huh?"

"Yeah," Vic said, without feeling. "Said he didn't want me—that he'd get the one back of that burglarizin'."

"Come on in, Kid," Lang said. "I don't get it, Sutter turnin' about-face like that. When he grabbed you an' waltzed outa here, I thought sure he'd throw you in the cooler for keeps. Nope, I don't savvy that—an' I still don't trust that big ape. But I never did think you was mixed up in it. Your job's still here, if you want it."

"Where's Miller?" Vic asked. "An' thanks—for trustin' me."

"Luke's upstairs, poundin' his ear, I hope," Lang said. "He was some riled, but I reckon he'll get over it. Tain't like as if he needed that dinero he lost. He's got a big spread an' cows by the hundreds."

Vic said, "Oh," and went back behind the desk. He had to think of something to tell Lang. The old fellow believed in him, but he was puzzled and kept looking at Vic.

"That safe is empty, plumb empty, now that the hoss has run out, you might say," Lang told him. "I ain't takin' no more chances. So, if them road agents get a hankerin' to come back to the honey pot, they'll be some disappointed. Never can tell what'll happen in this town since Sutter won the vote for the marshal job. Better check your cutter, Hamlin."

Vic pulled out his six-gun, clocked out the wheel and stuffed in two fresh cartridges.

"All right, son," Lang laughed, watching Vic's handling of the .45. "I reckon you're the night clerk. She's in your hands, an' I'm bettin', with that headache you're bound to

have, after that rap over the horns, there won't be no sleepin' on the job this night."

Some of the bleakness left Vic's face. Old John Lang trusted him—to a certain extent. But he hadn't told him where he put the balance of Miller's money. Not that Vic expected him to, after the trouble earlier in the night. After all, Vic was a stranger, a homeless bum, as far as old Lang knew. But the complete trust Lang had extended to him at first, when he hired him, had been something precious—something he'd never experienced before. If that was gone, he might as well hightail it. Vic had always been reaching out for something—steady work, friends. And now he'd gained it—only to lose it, maybe, in the space of a few hours. So now he'd go back to his lonesome pogy camps and boil his coffee in an old tin can. Away off, out over the prairie, he could hear the wail of the night freight calling to Whitehawk. His instinct was to run for it, to swing aboard an-empty. Slide the door and let her roll. The click of the wheels would be familiarly sweet music to his ears right now.

"Reckon I better drift along, Mr. Lang," Vic said. "Catch me a handful of freights an' pull out."

"You mean you'd quit, son?" Old Lang seemed disappointed. "I kinda figgered you'd help me see it through. You see, if Luke hollers around about losin' his money, it'll sure hurt my busines. Luke sold his beef early this fall, but in another week or so, most of the spreads'll be drivin' in their shipments. The Lang Hotel is headquarters for the cowmen. But it won't be, if it ain't a safe place to bed down, you can bet. I need a feller handy with a six-gun."

Vic was at a loss. For a minute, he didn't know just what to say. The oldest believed him a gunman, a kid with a quick trigger-finger. In putting on these range clothes and strapping the .45 to his hip, he'd stepped into a thing he hadn't figured on. The marshal hadn't even seen through his unintentional disguise. His eyes wandered to the dark stain of Dud Niles's blood on the floor—his first kill.

"You shore don't look like no waddy wantin' peace an' quiet," Lang said. "Not with that cutter hangin' on your hip. You help me out, an' by dang I'll see you got a job here long as you want. I won't live forever. Mebbe some day you can buy in—shuck your gun an' be somethin'."

Vic could feel his face go red. Should he tell him now? Tell him that the get-up was borrowed, that he'd never been on a horse in his life—that the only shooting he'd ever done had been in a shooting gallery where he'd worked for a week?

"Go back to the kitchen, son. Fix yourself

a bit of grub, an' I'll bet by mornin' you'll be set to stay here all winter."

Vic forced a grin to his face, nodded. He'd stay for a while, get that grub—and then when the old man went off to bed, he'd leave.

"An' that money," Lang said softly, staring hard at Vic, "is in the bottom of that wastebasket behind the desk. I'm trustin' you to guard it. Luke thinks it's up in his room, under his mattress. But I got 'er, an' I'm goin' to prove to him, by golly, that this here is a hotel a feller can call home."

VIC was all alone in the lobby after Lang went upstairs. The lines of bitterness that so recently shadowed his pale young face were now almost gone. In their place was an alertness, a look of expectancy, of a resolute will to meet the issue.

A check of the keyboard told him that all the guests were in for the night. Out in the kitchen, he managed to make himself a couple of thick sandwiches and drank half a pot of strong coffee. Back at the desk, he settled himself down to wait. Staring out into the moonlit street, he watched each shadow. Every small sound of the night seemed loud. A tumbleweed rattling down the boardwalk startled him, brought the hairs on his neck up stiff. Once he pulled out his gun, tried to make it swift. His mouth set in a grim line. Loop Sutter would fill him full of lead while he was thinking about it.

He got up and paced the length of the lobby, turned down the one lamp over the desk until its light was a soft yellow. The chairs and tables in the dark dining room took on strange shapes. He turned his back on it, continued his pacing.

It wasn't easy, this job of waiting. It was so still, he seemed to feel the silence, like a tangible substance, pressing against his ears. An inner sense, a premonition, was ringing little bells in his mind, warning him. Danger seemed to permeate the very air. His lips pressed into a firm mold, and more and more he shoved away the idea of running away. Old John Lang was depending on him. For the first time in his nineteen years, another man was expecting him to do a job, even if that job meant shooting at a human being.

He sat down on the stool behind the desk, wiped the cold sweat from his upper lip. It would be easy to run down there to the tracks and swing onto that freight. But if he did, that skunk marshal would come in here for Miller's money. When he found the safe locked he'd shoot the lock. Old John would hear that, and come running. Vic was suddenly remembering the marshal's jetty eyes. The man would kill old John without hesitation.

Vic sat there, thinking. Then the freight

whistled again and he heard the gruff voice of steam. The bell rang. It was too late now. He could hear the train rolling out onto the prairie.

Then there was a faint sound at the door, the scrape of boots. The door swung in. Vic stiffened, backed up against the desk, hands tense by his sides. This was it.

"All right, Kid," Loop whispered, slipping inside. "Everything clear?"

It was all Vic could do to open his mouth—no sound came.

"Well?"

"Yeah," Vic nodded. "Yeah, but—"

"Where at's that dinero, Kid?" The marshal was moving toward the desk, eyes hard with greed, an oily grin on his face. The grin vanished when he found the safe locked. "Come around here an' open 'er up," he demanded of Vic. "For a gunny, you're lookin' mighty peaked all at once. You figgerin' on throwin' in with me—or not?" Suddenly the lawman's gun was in his hand, pointing at Vic's thin chest.

Vic knew he had to keep the marshal from shooting off the lock. He bent down, twirled the dials as Long had shown him, then stepped back out of the way so Sutter could get in close to the safe.

"That's it, Kid." Loop chuckled, slipped his gun back into leather, and knelt down on the floor to peer into the safe.

The kid's lips were a tight, bloodless line in his face. He knew what would happen now, and hate tightened his muscles, gripped his heart with hard fingers, put an ache in his throat. His gun hand ached, too, stiff from tension. No matter if the lawman got the money, or didn't get it, he would shoot Vic Hamlin and Vic knew it. This was the show-down.

"It's empty!" Loop snapped. His hard eyes probed at Vic. "By damn!" he husked out.

There was no fear in Vic Hamlin now. His supple body, that could leap from a fast freight and never tumble, was tense. He was staring into the marshal's hard face, seeing the greed there, the cruelty, and the sly working of the evil mouth. The man would kill now. Vic could see it in his eyes, felt the lust of it, felt his hate for this crooked lawman blend into one all-powerful desire.

Might wasn't always right. He'd prove it. It didn't take a gun-swift killer to pull out a six-gun and thumb back the hammer. His right hand swept to the .45, dragged it out. He slashed down the long barrel toward Sutter's head.

Sutter twisted aside as he saw Vic's move. The gun flashed past his ear, glanced from the heavy shoulder.

"You low-down, mangy coyote!" Loop growled. The marshal leaped to his feet, hand

stabbing for his six-shooter. There was true magic in the way he got it clear of leather, started it blasting into life. Such fire blazed in the lawman's writhing eyes that Vic sucked in a quick breath, instinctively took a step back.

At the thunder of the lawman's gun, Vic staggered, jammed back into the desk. Hot lead ripped into his side, tore into his shoulder.

But he wasn't down—yet.

The .45 jumped in his hand. Sutter stopped, a dazed expression stamping down hard on his dark face. Blood trickled from under his black hair, and he slumped against the back wall. First surprise gone, rage flamed in his eyes, and he tried raising his gun again.

But he didn't quite make it. Vic wasn't depending on accuracy. He had five more bullets in that gun, and he was going to get rid of them as fast as he could work the trigger. He did.

The big man sprawled over the desk, slipped and fell against the safe, slid limply to the floor.

Until that moment, Vic didn't realize he'd been hit. Suddenly he knew he was sleepy and very tired. He eased down onto the safe, sat there leaning against the wall, watching, wide-eyed, the blood staining his shirt from the wound in his shoulder.

Upstairs a door slammed open. There was the pound of bare feet on the stairway. The hotel was awake, men were shouting, running.

Old John Lang got to Vic first. He pried the smoking six-gun from the kid's fingers and laid it on the desk.

"By golly, Kid!" the hotel man said. "By Golly! But—here, let me get at them holes in your side."

"I—I ain't no gunman, if that's what you're thinkin'," Vic muttered, managing a weak grin behind his freckles.

Lang's head snapped level and he stared into the kid's face.

"No, I don't reckon you are," he said, the sarcasm in his voice mingled with awe. "Just a twin to Bill Bonny, or I'm a treed coon."

"I just lifted that gun an' pulled the trigger," Vic protested. "Sutter tried to make a deal with me. He was goin' to split with me, an'—"

"An' you was sharp enough to see through that skunk an' beat him to the draw, that's all, Vic Hamlin," Lang chuckled. "An' it's a dang good thing you was fast with that cutter. None of these here lead pills will plant you in boothill—didn't bust no bones. You'll be able to travel in a week or two—if you still hanker to get away from Whitehawk. But right now you're goin' to rest in bed, by dang!"

"I been tryin' to tell you," Vic said. "I

ain't no gunman. I ain't no cowman. I ain't nothin'—just a bum. That's what I am. I—"

Vic stopped on a sudden thought. Maybe he *was* a gunman. One thing he was sure of—he was a Westerner. This was a big country—a country where a man could travel—or stay!

Big, red-faced, and mad as a curly-haired bull, Luke Miller came charging down into the lobby. He was too angry to talk. When he saw Sutter on the floor, dead, and Vic being bandaged by John Lang, he roared.

"You're a fine pair," he thundered at Lang and Vic. "All my dinero's gone now! An' you done killed the marshal, you cold-eyed little gun-thrower. By damn, I'll arrest you myself, as a citizen!"

The lobby suddenly became quiet. Lang jerked erect and crowded up against the big cowman.

"Cool off, you old line-back!" John Lang rasped out.

Vic saw his chance. Although the effort cost him a lot of his strength, and sharp stabs of pain, he managed to tip over the wastebasket near the safe, toe out the wad of bills Lang had put there. He reached down, tossed the bills into the open safe, eased the iron door shut.

"Look in Sutter's back pocket!"

After that the same old black cloud reached

out for Vic. He didn't want it now. Reality and the present held hope. He bit his lips until they bled, to keep from passing out.

Like a pricked balloon, Luke Miller's anger faded when he dug his money out of Sutter's pocket and laid his hands on the wad in the safe.

"Son," he said to Vic, "reckon you could overlook an old fool's ringy temper—mebbe forgive him, huh?"

"Shore," Vic grinned, imitating the Westerner's slow drawl. "Reckon I could."

"Kid, you want a job—any time—you just come out to my outfit. I'll pick you out a string of hosses that'll take your eye."

Vic shook his head. He was looking at Lang. Old John bristled up to the cowman.

"Lis'en, Luke Miller, since when did you get the idee you could come in here an' hire my partner right out from under my nose? Vic's tired of the salty life. Told me so himself—didn't you. Vic? He's in the hotel business, startin' right now. He wants to forget all about this gun-throwin', an' such like."

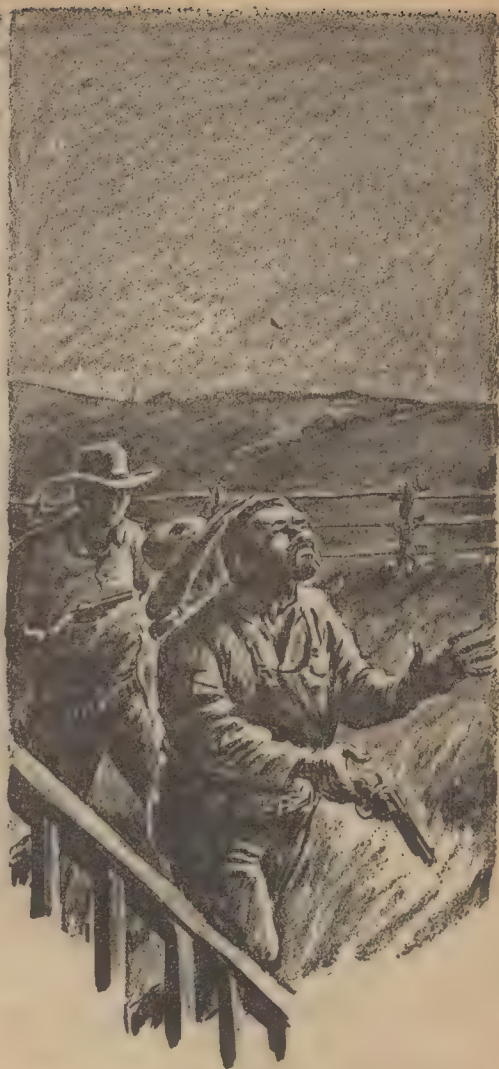
Vic stretched out so the doc could get at his shoulder.

"Mr. Lang," he asked, wincing as the doc dug for lead, "does that there job include meals? 'Cause if it does, I shore could use a big thick slice of that ham that's out there in the ice box."

Many flashlight
batteries GO DEAD
just lying around-
BUT

RAY-O-VAC
LEAKPROOF BATTERIES
Stay Fresh
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DEAD MAN'S TOWN

"Pat Mills was my pal, gents. An' now he's dead—by yore guns. Come out shootin'—because one of us ain't riding home!"

CHAPTER ONE

Unborn Town

BIG DAN McCOY pulled in his Booger horse near a youngster who was sitting in the shade of a cottonwood tree and throwing a stick to a disinterested dog. Dan thought the kid's expression was rather hostile, but he grinned down at him just the same in a friendly fashion.

"Couldn't tell me where the Horseshoe spread is?" Big Dan asked.

The boy said, "No!" very quickly. He hollered at his dog "Hey—you Lightnin', come here!"

The dog loped up carrying the stick and set it down at the boy's feet. The boy left it there and ran off up the dusty road as fast as he could peg it, with the dog following. Dan McCoy shrugged his broad shoulders and let



Dan shot
Thumper
in the head.

By ART LAWSON

his horse amble on in the direction opposite that which the youngster had taken. They finally came to a couple of seedy shacks and one huge building set at a crossroads near a ford in the creek. Spread clear over the back of this big frame building a huge sign had been painted.

EMPIRE CITY
Fastest Growing City
IN THE WEST
For Inf. see Boye Engle

Dan brought his horse around to the front of the building where it faced the creek. Between the windows of the second story of the big building were similar signs to the one on the rear. A wooden awning and sidewalk stretched the entire length of the front and around the two sides. The ground floor was cut up into just about every kind of shop a town would need. There was a saloon and a general store, a harness shop and barber shop.

There was a place called simply "Eats," and one bearing the announcement:

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY
See ENGLE for
INFORMATION!
EMPIRE CITY DEVELOPMENT CO.

Information was exactly what Big Dan wanted but the behavior of the small boy had warned him and furthermore he always had believed that a saloon was the best place to find out what he wanted to know, so he rode up to it and dismounted. There were no saddle horses drawn up to the hitchrack, though there were half a dozen rigs of all sorts along the front of the big building. He had noticed, too, that there were no saddles in the window of the harness shop.

He stepped down lightly, hitched up his pants to ease the seat, rattled his spurs and went into the saloon. A couple of men badly in need of shaves were sitting at a knife-

marked table in one corner, having an argument. Their eyes were hostile, too, when they glanced at Big Dan, and they quit talking the moment they saw him. The barkeep's round, pink face was wrinkled with worry. Big Dan had not even gotten a foot up to the iron pipe rail before the barman began to whine at him.

"Now, look, mister, you know damn well I can't serve you," he said. "I just can't do it. It ain't my choice."

"I'm not an Injun," Dan said, "and I'm not a woman. I come a long way and I'm thirsty. Just draw me a beer."

The barman shook his head. "No beer."

Big Dan's temper was rising like a thermometer on a hot day. He tried to keep his voice down and his anger under control. He took a silver dollar from his levis pocket and spun it on the bar.

"If you ain't got beer, give me water, or tea, or whatever you have got," Dan said.

"I ain't got nothin'," the bartender said, "for cowboys."

Big Dan had suspected something like that. There was the barbed wire, the irrigation ditches, the scared kid. There had been plowed fields along both sides of the road leading to Empire City—and battered, dirty rigs along Main Street. Then Dan's anger broke through and he grabbed the bartender by the front of his white shirt to yank him harshly up against the bar. Breath wheezed out of the little man.

A voice behind Dan said, "Leave be, mister. You know where the door is. How about using it?"

Dan dropped the bartender. He turned slowly. The man facing him was not quite as tall as Dan but somewhat heavier. He wore flat-heeled boots, Dan noticed, and bib overalls. He had a gunbelt around his waist which made the bib of the overalls blouse out. The black butt of a Colt six-shooter jutted from a black, oiled holster set on a swivel so the man did not even have to draw to shoot. Dan decided he did not like this man at all.

He said softly, "After I've had my beer, I'll take to lookin' for it."

The man's baby-blue eyes blinked. The thumb that had been hooked in the strap of his overalls began to slide a little and Dan knew that the hand was about to drop to that six-shooter.

Dan shoved himself from the bar, butting into the man with his chest. His left beat the nester's hand to the man's gun butt, while he smashed a short, hard right to the other's ear. He kned him in the belly and pistol-whipped the man with his own weapon. The other went down without a sigh.

Another man was standing behind the table with his hands up, on a level with his face, and the open palms toward Dan.

"Git behind the bar," Dan said.

The man moved swiftly to comply—and the bartender drew a beer which he set before Dan. He added a fresh bottle of whiskey and a glass.

"On the house," he said.

BIG DAN McCOY drank his drink and had another. "Now maybe one of you gentlemen could do something for me? Maybe you'd oblige by telling me where at is the Horeshoe outfit?"

Each waited for the other to speak. Then the bartender said resignedly, "Why, I never heard of no Horseshoe spread around these parts."

"Me neither," the other said.

Dan's silver dollar still lay on the bar. With a forefinger he flipped it across toward the bartender.

"When your friend comes to," he said, "buy him a snort on me." He lay the man's gun down beside the dollar, picked up the whiskey bottle by the neck, and turned away from the bar. He walked slowly and deliberately toward the door, and out.

He almost bumped into a girl who had been hurrying down the boardwalk. She stopped, startled, staring at him with wide blue eyes. He tipped his hat with his left hand and bowed.

"Sorry, miss," he said.

He could hear a man running on his toes inside the barroom and almost instantly the swing doors slatted open and the gunman who had done no fighting slid to a halt just outside the building. His face was a blank mask.

"Oh, hell—sorry!" he said, and ducked back inside.

The girl's face grew flushed. Without actually doing so she seemed to stamp her foot.

"I never saw Billy Lee so polite," she said.

"Why, I reckon Billy knows a gentleman when he sees one," Dan said. "Meanin' me."

He settled his hat on his head at a slightly rakish angle and, carrying his whiskey bottle, walked slowly up Main Street under the wooden awning. He heard the girl running after him, but when he got to the sign that started off with "Golden Opportunity" and opened the door and stepped in, the footsteps ceased.

He was in a medium-sized room, cut in half by an oak railing. Benches lined the walls this side of the rail, and big maps painted in bright colors hung down from the ceiling. Behind the rail were two desks and a big iron safe. A tall, pale young man sat at one of the desks. He had been writing when Big Dan came in. Now he glanced up rather querulously. When he saw the big hat on the tall man, the checkered shirt and calfskin vest, he began to shiver.

Big Dan opened the gate in the railing and went through. He set the bottle of whiskey on the man's desk, beside a triangular marker

bearing the name, Engle. Slowly Dan smiled.

"The boys down the street give me this," he said evenly. "But they couldn't give me the information I'm wanting. Swap?"

"I dunno," Engle said.

"All I want to know is—where at is the Horseshoe Ranch?" Dan said.

Engle went white. The girl had followed Dan in now and had halted on the other side of the fence.

She said suddenly, "I'll tell you where it is."

Dan picked up the bottle and went through the gate again. She was a very pretty girl with black hair and very big eyes. She wore a bright calico dress with a square neck that set off a nice figure, and a wide hat to keep the sun from the freckles on her short nose. Her mouth, he reckoned, would ordinarily be tender, but right now her lips were set in a hard line.

"Look!" she said. She went over to one of the big maps. "This is the ford," she said. "Here's the dam." She pointed out these things. "Here we are—and here's the Horseshoe."

The Horseshoe was below the dam. It was marked off in squares. There were named streets running North and South—Washington Street, Adams Street, Jefferson Street. Avenues ran East and West—Massachusetts Avenue, Texas Avenue. Where Massachusetts Avenue and Jackson Street met there was a square marked off. Houston Park, it was called. The girl's finger stopped here and she tapped the spot gently as she spoke.

"Here," she said slowly, "is the Horseshoe headquarters."

"Ought to be easy to find, with the streets all marked out," Big Dan said, and smiled at her. "You win the bottle, miss."

He handed it to her and she took it without thinking, as people will. Then she realized what she had done and tried to give it back. But Dan was not accepting it. One of those gunnies had sneaked up the street. Boye Engle had taken a pistol from a desk drawer, and a third man had come in through the back door of the real estate office.

"Back up, Lovey," this third man was saying. "We want to have a little talk with this hombre."

The girl hesitated. Then she wheeled around and backed into Big Dan instead of away from him. He retreated to the wall, but she kept herself up against him. He felt a trembling through her body.

"I don't like the way you talk, Blackie," she said. "But if it's words instead of guns—come out in the open—and call off that rat, Slick Billy Lee."

SLOWLY the man emerged from the rear of the building. He took the pistol from Boye Engle and shoved it back into the drawer. Then he went to the front door and said, "Go on home, Lee."

Bill Lee said from outside, "But this hombre pistol-whipped Thumper with his own hawglaig."

"Beat it," the new man said shortly.

He came back into the land office. The first thing Big Dan noticed when he got a real look at the man was that he could easily be related to the girl he had called Lovey. Both had the same blue eyes and black hair. But where the girl was rather small and delicate the man was as big as Dan. He shrugged.

"Suit you, Lovey?" he asked.

"Not exactly," she said. She stepped forward slightly, but the top of her wide straw hat was still about on a level with Dan's nose and a short feather in it kept dancing about when she talked. It annoyed him because it tended to distract him. "If this hombre beat up Thumper, Thumper likely had it coming to him," she said. "You don't have to—"

Big Dan tapped the girl on the shoulder with a finger. She stopped talking and turned completely about to look up at him. There was no innocence in those wide blue eyes.

"Thanks a lot," he said, "but I don't reckon these hombres are as dangerous as you seem to think." To Boye Engle he added, "Now that I know where the Horseshoe outfit is, I reckon I'll sort of ride out there. Be seein' yuh, boys."

The girl blocked him. With a hand on his arm she smiled hesitantly up at him. She said swiftly, "I'm Lovey Creon, mister. The big guy's my brother, Blackie. Maybe he wouldn't like to have you go out there to the Horseshoe."

Big Dan said, "The Horseshoe's right on the main drag, accordin' to that map. And it's operated by a good friend of mine. Seems unlikely to me that your big brother would mind if I went calling on my old pardner."

"Of course not," Blackie Creon said. "The heat's just affected Lovey's head. And about that talk I wanted to have with you, mister, it can wait until you get back. But if it's Pat Mills you're hunting for—you better try boot-hill."

If Blackie Creon had expected Big Dan McCoy to show surprise at the announcement that Pat Mills was dead he must have been disappointed. From the moment the kid had run away from him, Dan had known something was wrong. When he saw the subdivision map on the wall here in the real estate office, he had been sure Pat must have been

Let Your BOND AGE—To End BONDAGE!

dead. Pat had loved this bit of land—this ranch. He never would have given it up.

"I'll take that suggestion," Dan McCoy said softly, "and after that—I'll be back."

He bowed slightly to the girl, with a hard twist to his mouth. Then he left—making his spurs hum like a rattler when he went over the threshold.

CHAPTER TWO

Devil's Graveyard

ACROSS the creek Big Dan McCoy found half a dozen fresh graves but could not pick out the one that must be Pat Mills'. This one, he thought, with the faded wild flowers certainly would not be Pat's—but it was the newest and without a headstone, so he stopped by it a moment, looking down on the reddish earth, trying to picture what lay below. He took off his big Stetson and held it on both hands, unconsciously rolling the brim.

While he was there a rider came into the graveyard and dismounted near the gate where Dan's horse stood. At first he thought it was a youngster, then realized suddenly as he saw her silhouette that it was a girl—not the same one. She carried a short piece of heavy plank and a shovel and she came right up to where he was standing and set the plank down beside the grave.

"Give you a hand, miss?" he offered.

She glanced up at him with some wonder in her expression. She was not pretty, like Lovey Creon, and she wore scuffed boots, levis and a plain red shirt. But there was something to her that Lovey Creon did not have—something Dan both understood and yet did not quite fathom. A sort of lithe wariness as if she suspected everybody and the whole world, and was readying for battle.

"Thanks," she said. "I just wanted to set up this headboard."

He took the shovel, figured out the direction by the other stones and began to dig. He went down about a foot, then picked up the board. A hot iron bar had been used to burn a legend on one side of it—Big Dan McCoy had not intended reading it, but when he saw the first two words he could not stop.

PAT MILLS
The Finest Gent
In The World
Murdered
by
Blackie Creon

It hit him square in the stomach, making him feel actually sick. He gripped the board so hard it hurt his wrist, and glanced up

into the girl's shadowed dark eyes. Her whole expression was set, frozen.

"Well?" she said.

"A friend of yours?" Dan asked softly.

"A very good friend," she said. "If you've changed your mind about helping me I can—"

"I haven't changed my mind," Big Dan said. He set the headboard gently, tapped it square with the back of the shovel, and pitched in the earth. He tamped it down good and solid. He did not want Blackie Creon or one of his ugly boys coming by and pulling it up with a rope. When he was through he stood for a moment reading over again those black, burned words.

Awkwardly he told the girl, "I'm sorry. You must have liked him a lot to—to call him what you did."

"Yes," she said huskily.

She reached down for the shovel but Big Dan intercepted her. His hand touched hers for the briefest second and their eyes met again, and he thought that they had this one thing in common—they had together set the headstone of the man they both thought was the finest gent in the world.

"I'll tote this shovel to your horse," he said.

He turned his head away so she could not see his eyes and side by side they walked down to the gate. Their horses had become acquainted. His horse was standing with its head stuck over the back of her horse's neck.

"Seems like my Booger horse sort of cottons to yours," he said.

The girl stopped suddenly, clutching at his arm. Her wide-mouthed, dark-eyed face was tense.

"Booger? That his name?" she said with some excitement.

"That's right," he said. "And me—I'm Joe Glee."

Her disappointment was obvious and powerful. She let go of him and blinked her big eyes.

"I thought for a minute you might be somebody else," she said. "But I guess you're not. I'm Diana Kemble. You'll always be welcome at the Running K—you and Booger."

She swung away quickly, and up onto her horse, and he noticed that she did not take the trail across the ford. She hurried down a trail that he vaguely remembered was marked "River Drive," on that map on the wall of Boye Engle's office.

He went back to the grave and spoke to it. "Mind if I pick up your cards, Pat?" he asked, and it seemed to him that he got an answer.

BOOGER whinnied gently as Big Dan swung into the saddle, then pointed his nose for the ford. He halted there a moment to snuff in the water and have a

drink, then crossed gingerly to the far side where he climbed the gravelly bank leading to Main Street. The sun had set while Dan was at the graveyard and now lights glowed in friendly fashion in the big building that apparently formed the whole business section of Empire City. There Booger slowed down before the twin lanterns swinging at each side of the doors to the saloon, but Big Dan McCoy sent him on past the rigs gathered at the hitchracks. Big Dan noticed that the "Eats" was very busy. Quite a few men lounged in the shadows beneath the long wooden awning. Business had picked up since Dan had left town earlier in the evening.

On the door to the Golden Opportunity a sign hung, announcing that the place was closed. However there was a light inside, so Dan reined his horse to the rack, dismounted, and went up to the real estate office. Though closed, the door was unlocked, and Dan opened it and went in.

It was rather dark in here. A couple of round-wicked Rochester lamps hung from the ceiling on counterweighted chains. One of these lamps was turned so low it hardly shed any glow at all. The other had not been lit and under it Blackie Creon sat in a swivel chair with his feet up on his desk. Dan noticed he did not wear spurs. Under the pale ring from the lighted lantern sat Boye Engle. His feet were on the floor.

"Find your friend?" Blackie asked.

Big Dan said, "Pat Mills was the best pal I ever had, Mr. Creon. Him and me rode many a mile together before he got the notion of settling down and becoming a rancher. Got a letter from him not so long ago sayin' friendship was long and life short, so why not come visitin'."

He stopped then. Behind his desk Boye Engle was shivering again. He sat very straight in his chair with one hand on the desk top, right above the knob of the drawer where he kept his pistol. Blackie Creon, though, just loafed there as if entertaining some familiar and not very important crony.

"That was a mighty nice sentiment of Pat's," Blackie said. "Pat was a right hombre. We miss him." Blackie added. "Shot himself by accident. Cleaning his gun—and it went off."

Dan said, "You wanted to have a little talk with me when I got back?"

"Forgot all about it," Blackie said. "To tell the truth, I had you down for somebody else. We've been deviled lately by a lot of half-wild cowboys shooting up the city and I thought you were one of them—especially when I heard you had beaten up Thumper. But this Pat Mills business puts a different light on things. I suppose Thumper started the fight."

Thumper had started it, but Dan McCoy did not say so. Instead he went over to the map on the wall. "Corner of Mass Avenue and Jackson Street," he said. "There's where I aim to set up housekeeping."

"You thinkin' of buying a lot?"

Blackie's voice was still casual, but Boye Engle shivered so hard the creaking of his chair grew audible in the room. Blackie Creon put his feet on the floor and Dan learned that he had a pistol in his lap.

"No," Dan said. "I already own the lot on that corner. Far as I can figure I own just about three-fourths of the city."

Blackie cleared his throat lengthily. His hands were below the desk top now. In the dusk his face reminded Dan of an undertaker trying to look sympathetic at the funeral of a man he hated.

"You've made a mistake," Creon said. "Mills died without an heir. He owned nothing, anyway. His outfit was mortgaged for more than it was worth and the Empire City Development Company bought up the mortgage. I'm sorry, mister."

Big Dan McCoy turned slowly from the map. His expression was the same as it had been when Blackie told him that Pat Mills was dead.

"Reckon you're mixed up a little, Mr. Creon," he said softly. "I'm the hombre who should be sorry for you. You seem to have gone to a lot of trouble building up this town site—and all for nothing. You see—I own the Horseshoe. I put up the money for it and I never mortgaged it to anybody. Pat Mills was just working for me as tenant."

"That's what I told you," Boye Engle said, suddenly breaking.

"Shut up!" Blackie Creon snapped.

And Dan saw Creon's shoulder twitch as the dark-faced man began to raise his hand from under the table.

BIG DAN got to the floor before Blackie's pistol muzzle cleared the desk. He did not worry about the shivering Engle, who was trying to duck out of sight while pulling open his gun drawer—the latter was in no position for a quick shot. Dan concentrated on Blackie Creon and put his first bullet right through Blackie's desk. It smashed through the long top drawer, slamming it out into Blackie's stomach, but it missed Blackie, whose shot blasted also into the desk. Meanwhile Dan was taking a blind shot over the top of Boye Engle's desk, at the sound of heavy footsteps running up from the rear.

He heard the crash of glass and a man crying out, "Where is he, boss—where is he?"

The boss was not answering. He was still fighting the desk drawer that had butted into

him and he was looking for Dan. Dan had crossed the room on his hands and knees, and rolling. He was almost under Creon's desk—with a bitter decision to make. He could kill Creon easily. But that would leave him with only two cartridges in his Colt since he had been carrying five instead of six for safety. With the two bullets he would still have to face the gunman in back, Boye Engle, who would eventually snap out of it, and whoever Creon might have planted out front.

He decided the risk was too great and that he would have to get Blackie some other time. He stood up right next to Blackie's desk and turned the heavy piece of furniture over on top of the big man. Blackie sprawled out of the swivel chair, his gun at last coming free. Dan sprinted for the big front window and dove through.

Almost at the same instant the door was spattered with a fusillade from men who had thought he would try to escape that way. Meanwhile Big Dan had collided with two spectators who had not had the sense to seek cover. They sprawled in the gutter. Dan recovered his balance and ducked under a horse at the rack. He heard shooting and a man scream horribly, and sprinted for Booger, whose nostrils were wide, ears flat against his head.

He grabbed the reins from the rack, ran into the street, and toward the ford. For a dozen yards the horse trailed. Then he began to run and when he came by Dan lifted himself into the saddle.

He used his three shots. He put the first into a knot of men standing before the real estate office, still unsure as to what had happened, and the second one into the swinging doors of the saloon to scatter the curious.

And then, for a second as he turned left for the ford, he was a big and full target for the whole town. His horse winced under a grazing shot and Dan, himself, felt a hot sting across his shoulders. He used his third shot, then, just as the horse plunged over the rim of the creek and hit for the crossing, skittering his bullet down the street in a whining ricochet.

Then he prayed to Lady Luck and hunched his head into his sore shoulders and let Booger have his head.

HE PASSED the dam, a dirt-and-log affair that would wash out in the first real freshet, and crossed the almost dry creek below it to the south side on which both the Horseshoe and the big building called Empire City stood. Here he went through a pole gate in a barbed wire fence, and then as far as he could see was clear prairie in which wooden pegs had been driven. He went down an avenue of these pegs until

he came to the Horseshoe Headquarters. Even in the night he could see that this spread was not much, though it was beautifully located, on a point where the creek took a sharp bend beyond a small hill.

Pat Mills had built a split-log shanty, set up like a small square stockade. On top of that he had put a thatched roof. The two windows started about five feet from the ground and ran up to the ceiling. Both the sashes had been broken as if small boys had been throwing rocks at them, and the batten door banged back and forth in dismal fashion.

To the right there was a good small corral and the beginning of what would eventually be a long lean-to shelter for calving cows in cold weather. But there was no sign of life at all around the place as Dan rode in closer in the moonlight. There was only the feeling of decay and desertion.

Dan made a complete circle around the buildings, keeping at some distance and finally came back along the creek with great caution. There his horse started to whinny, but Dan pulled him up fast, stopping him. He dismounted and stood beside the animal's head, patting the horse's neck. After a moment Dan led the horse into the brush by the creek and moved slowly up-wind, until he discovered another mount hidden in a grove of cottonwoods. It was too dark in here to see clearly enough to recognize the horse or its saddle. Dan learned, though, that the cinch had not been loosened and that the reins had simply been looped over a limb. Whoever had left this horse here was planning on a quick getaway—whoever had ridden out, judging by the condition of the animal, had come a good hour or more ago.

That eliminated anyone who knew of the fight in town—but left a possibility that made Dan's ears suddenly burn.

He moved away to approach the cabin. In his tour around the group of buildings he had noticed that there was one blind side to the shack, where a mud and stick chimney rose above the lowest part of the roof. Pat Mills, evidently, had not been expecting trouble when he built the place.

Dan waited close to this blind wall for a long time, but heard nothing more than the banging of the door and the sigh of wind through broken windows. Finally he worked his way carefully around to the front of the house, keeping his head below window level, remaining very close to the walls of the cabin. When he stepped inside, he did it fast and to one side of the open doorway, where he hunkered tensely, knowing that what he had expected was a fact. He was not alone.

There was laughter. "That was very funny." It was a girl. "You don't know how funny that was, Mis-ter Joe Glee."

It was Diana Kemble—not the Lovey Creon girl whom he had half expected, and Big Dan McCoy's ears were hotter than ever.

He said, "I met up with your horse down in the brush alongside the creek. All saddled and ready to go."

It made her stop laughing. She said in a soft voice, "You're a mighty thorough man, Mr. Joe Glee. You remind me a little of a gent Pat Mills used to talk about—an old pardner of Pat's. Pat used to say this hombre would fight a whole army if he was a mind to, but he always scouted the enemy first and then chose his ground."

"Sounds sensible to me," Big Dan said. He wished the girl had not come. She was more now than just a voice in the darkness, for a wild-rose fragrance filled the place with faint scent. "And what happened to this very smart hombre?"

"Maybe I ought to ask you that," the girl said tensely.

It was Dan's turn to laugh, now. "Why—I wouldn't know," he said. "I'm just a hombre who's buyin' the lot at the corner of Mass Avenue and Jackson Street from the Empire City Development Company. They say—"

"Stop it!" she said angrily. She was breathing sharply. He leaned forward and

thought he could see her now across the room. "They jumped Pat in bed," she said suddenly. "Two of them held him down while the third shot him in the head with his own twelve gauge—both barrels. And the coroner called it an accident."

Big Dan McCoy ceased his bantering manner. "This Pat Mills was keepin' company with you, so to speak? You don't need to answer, Miss Kemble, if—"

"He was just a good friend and a neighbor," she said. "He was like a big brother. But—" Her voice broke down completely, and Dan thought she was crying. Pat Mills would fit the role of big brother to her, Dan thought. He went over to the girl, to stand close beside her. He reached down to touch her shoulder and she looked up.

"He was swell," she said softly. "He never hurt anybody."

"I'm sure he was, miss," Dan said. "Ready to go home?"

"Yes—Mr. Glee," she said in a controlled voice. She got up to cross the room silently in bare feet. At the doorway she sat down to put on her boots.

She said, "This Empire City outfit has the whole county under their thumbs now. They built that dam and claim they are going to irrigate—but anybody knows, if he's been here

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more than a couple years, that the creek's empty half the time and overflows the rest. That's how the fight started. Pat Mills told a couple suckers that they were being used. He said the dam's only a big mud pie. Creon moved in and killed him, then took his land and subdivided it. He's just startin' his campaign."

She said this without passion, as if she had already repeated it so often the emotion had been sapped from the concept. Then she wheeled to face Big Dan in the doorway. In the moonlight her face was strong and lovely, and the squareness of her shoulders was backed with purpose.

"They'll cross the creek and try to take me next," she said, "but when they do they're goin' to have a fight, Mr. Glee."

"Maybe they won't cross the creek," Dan said. "This Lovey Creon girl—"

"You know her?"

"Why, sure," he said. "Cute as a button, too. And uppity. She don't seem to favor their little underhanded business so much. If you were nice to her—"

"If I was nice to *her*? Look—there's a sayin', 'If you want to catch a rat, bait your trap with cheese, but if it's a man you're after, use a pretty woman.'"

Dan said, "It's gettin' late, miss. Maybe we better be drifting."

She stared at him for a moment with her head cocked slightly to one side, her dark eyes wide and puzzled.

Finally she said, "I can get home on my own," and started toward the place where she had left her horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Dead Man's Town

DOWN here below the dam there was no barbed wire as there had been above it. There was just the endless rich prairie, dotted occasionally with cattle—and the stakes all over the place driven into the sod—surveyors' markings. It was a phantom town—a town that was being worked into false being in a terrific hurry—and once Blackie had peddled a good piece of it he would hop on to fresher territory and try the same game all over again.

The suckers from the East were no affair of Dan's—nor was Diana Kemble. But Pat Mills had been his partner—and the girl had been Pat's friend.

When he brought his horse out of the brush, Diana was already riding downstream. He caught up with her at a place where the creek widened and the bank had been cut down.

She said tightly, "Please go away."

"No." He grinned. "When a lady comes

visitin' in my cabin I always see her home."

Diana wheeled, drove her horse into the creek so its hoofs kicked up spray that looked like diamonds and pearls in the moonlight. Dan kept close beside her, riding hard. On this side of the creek there were no stakes. There were more cattle, too, and a real feeling of cow country. Despite the silent and angry girl beside him Dan liked the feel of this range.

Then they cut around behind a low hill, to emerge suddenly in a cove filled with moonlight. Big Dan was struck by the size of the Running K laid out there before him. It had not occurred to him that it would be anything more than a little shanty outfit like Pat's. But this spread had a great rambling ranch house, half a dozen corrals, a couple of bunkhouses and cook shacks, a long row of outhouses, carriage sheds, and a blacksmith shop. A couple of windmills clanked steadily, pumping water from wells to the house and the kitchen.

The place seemed asleep to Dan McCoy, yet Diana seemed frightened, as well as angry, when they drew to a halt by the big ranch house.

Dan started to speak but was stopped when a chuckle broke through the quiet and a man appeared from the shadows. He came out with a shotgun in his hands. A six-pointed silver star shone on his suspenders.

He said, "Ain't you McCoy?"

Diana Kemble's face was completely blank for a moment, then showed pure consternation.

She said quickly, "The name is Joe Glee. He's been with me all evening—talking about Lovey Creon."

"Then I'll take him to her," the sheriff said. "She'd like to hear what he's been up to—and ridin' in the moonlight with a pretty girl ain't all of it. Up with the hands, McCoy."

Dan did not move, and the sheriff's voice cracked angrily.

"You're wanted for the murder of Slick Billy Lee, mister. He died during that gunfight in the city. And that ain't all, Miss Diana. He beat up Thumper, filled Creon's leg so full of desk splinters Blackie can hardly walk, and he wrecked the land office. What else, McCoy?"

"You missed one little thing," Dan said. "You missed the fact that they started the fighting."

"Not the way I heard it," the sheriff said. "You comin', McCoy?"

BUT the sheriff and the Kemble girl were not the only ones here in the Running K yard—you could sense these things, Dan thought. There was someone on the deep front porch—the shadows there had altered

subtly. Something else was wrong, too—there was no sound of snoring in the bunkhouse. Dan reckoned the sheriff had him surrounded.

He said, "I wouldn't feel safe back there in Empire City, sheriff. If Creon's got all those counts against me he won't feel pleasantly disposed toward me, is the way I look at it. I reckon I'll have to turn down your invitation."

Diana said tensely, "Don't be a fool—"

The sheriff guffawed at that. "Okay, boys," he called. Men began to appear from the gloom. In the moonlight Dan recognized the one they called Thumper. Thumper's face was twisted queerly; he would be only too eager to start the shooting. Boye Engle came out, too, shivering still—a caricature of a man. Then Blackie Creon limped painfully into the yard. There were others—Dan recognized several hangers-on about town.

"Now—take 'er easy, boys," the sheriff was saying. "We want this to be all proper and accordin' to the law. Even if this skunk did murder one of the boys in cold blood he's got his rights to a legal trial."

Boye Engle was carrying a piece of manila rope, holding it as if it were a rattler about to strike, and Dan knew that they had no intention of taking him back to Empire City alive. Diana Kemble knew it, too, and without being too obvious she was trying to get between him and the sheriff's shotgun.

He wanted none of that.

He said, "You got me cold, sheriff," and swung from the saddle. Thumper started to run toward him, shouting, and behind his horse Dan reached for his six-shooter. The big roan whinnied and swerved—and Dan shot Thumper in the head.

He plunged for the stairs leading to the gallery, wanting to get Creon, too, before the end.

But as he hit the top of the porch a woman began to scream right ahead of him. It could not be Diana who was still in the yard. Then he saw her in dim outline against the door, dressed in a short skirt, her dark hair to her shoulders—Lovey Creon. Dan dove past her, hit a small rug and slid across the floor as if on a sled.

Lovey had started shooting.

She was yelling, "The back door—Danny!"

IT WAS one of those things—Dan hadn't reckoned on it, and didn't know what to do. He heard the girl let go with one wild burst of shooting that filled the room with the bitter smell of gunsmoke.

Then everything was silent again, except for the distant sound of a stampeding horse. That would be Booger, most likely, still on his way after getting his ribs tickled with

the sight of Dan's six-shooter Booger was safe.

Lovey Creon was shouting, "You come and get him, Engle—come on!"

"Get out of that doorway, Lovey." This was Blackie Creon.

"Try and make me!"

Dan McCoy got to his hands and knees and crawled about the edge of the big room until he found a door. This he opened silently, then slammed it violently.

Someone yipped, "There he goes!"

A horse ran sharply out of the yard and around to the rear of the house. Diana Kemble was shouting, "Hit for the creek!" Dan got to a window and watched. The sheriff was cursing bitterly and running in a sort of lope. Diana stampeded the wagon in which the posse had come from town into the creek.

All around now the men were beating the brush. Dan turned back. On the porch, Lovey Creon, who had shown so much bravery a moment ago, walked slowly across to the steps where she sat down with a thump.

She was crying very hard, like a little girl.

Inside the living room Big Dan McCoy silently removed the one spent shell in his pistol and loaded up with a fresh cartridge. Then he edged across the slick floor to the doorway. The Creon girl did not hear him coming and for a moment he stood directly behind her looking out into the night. Almost in the center of the yard the body of Thumper lay motionless. A man limped past him without even glancing down, and came up to the bottom of the stairs. Dan stepped back out of sight.

"This is quits," the man in the yard said bitterly. "If you weren't my sister I'd kill you," he went on. "But tomorrow you go—*sabe?* And don't come back."

Lovey stopped crying, though her shoulders still shook, and her voice was ragged. "I figured on going, anyway—*sabe?*" she mocked him. "And I never figured on coming back."

Blackie's anger was boiling over the top. His voice rasped.

He said, "If you think you're going with McCoy, you're crazier than I thought. We have a dozen men along the creek. He won't get away. Singer's gone for the hounds."

"Then you'll have to sic them on me, too," Lovey said slowly. "You're bad, Blackie, clear through. But I'm not. I figured on clearing out—but I figured on doing McCoy a favor first. That's why I sneaked in here to warn him. But I don't give a damn about him, Blackie." She stood up. "Go get your hounds, yellow-belly," she said spitefully. "But if I were you I'd sort of fetch Boye out from under these stairs. The hound dogs might think he's the hombre they're hunting. He smells more of skunk than Dan."

There was a sound half way between coughing and choking—and Boye Engle appeared from under the stairs where he had been hiding in preference to taking a chance against Dan McCoy in the brush. Boye still hung onto his hangrope.

Boye began, "I—"

Up in the brush there was a sudden rattle of gunfire as one of the Creon boys was mistaken by another for the man they were hunting. Around toward the north a horse was trotting in. In the house Dan took a deep breath and pouched his gun.

He went across the porch and down the steps. He heard the girl's breath stop, and Blackie Creon and Boye Engle swore.

"Evenin', boys," Dan said.

HE HAD taken them both so much by surprise he was right up to them before either could make a move. When Blackie Creon finally reached for his pistol, Dan got to his six-shooter first and smashed Blackie's wrist with it. When Blackie lunged down, Dan lashed out with his foot, straightening him again. Without his retinue of gunmen, Dan found himself thinking, Blackie was a surprisingly poor fighter.

Dan backed away, but Engle had made no move.

"Who killed Pat Mills?"

No one answered. On the steps Lovey Creon was silent. Engle had backed away, and was now very careful to appear completely unhostile. Blackie Creon still eyed his lost gun—a fact Dan appeared not to notice.

A rider was coming in fast in the distance; Dan listened to the drum of hoofs. The shooting had stopped in the brush—but closer to town hounds had started baying. There was not much time to lose.

Smiling thinly, Dan unbuckled his belt and tossed gun and all up beside the stairs.

"I'm going to take you apart limb by limb," Dan said, "if you don't tell me who killed Pat Mills—and tell me quick. I'll break your fingers off one at a time and stomp your toes to shreds. And if you think I'm fooling, just keep quiet another minute."

Blackie Creon saw his chance. The gun on the ground was nearer to him than it was to Dan McCoy—though his right wrist was still out of commission. He fell on it and got it, and Dan moved so that the girl on the porch was out of Blackie's line of fire.

Blackie swore. "Damn you, I'll kill you, too," he shouted, as much as admitting he had killed Mills. "You yellow skunk, Engle—and you double-crossing—"

He missed Dan by two yards on the first shot, and more than a yard on the second. Then Dan was moving in on him again and Blackie grew frantic. He missed Dan a third

time and tried to slash at him with the pistol barrel, when Dan's fist lifted him clear from the ground and laid him out cold on the ground.

Big Dan hunched over him a second, then turned to Boye Engle.

"Ready for your turn?" he asked.

Before Engle could answer, the rider they had heard swept into the yard, right past them and down toward the bunkhouses. It was Diana Kemble.

She shouted, "They're coming back—"

Engle looked blank for a second. Then an expression of entreaty came over his face.

"I'm not the skunk you think I am, McCoy," he said. "Maybe I'm yellow. I don't know. Give me a chance—I'll show at least I'm square."

Dan grinned and turned toward the bunkhouse. Diana's men were rushing out. Lovey Creon uttered a short, sharp cry as she saw a shadow emerge from the brush. She lifted her rifle carefully and shot. A man yelled and jumped back into cover. Then the yard seemed deserted again except for the dead man and the unconscious leader stretched on the hard-packed earth. Everybody had jumped for cover at Lovey's first shout.

Boye Engle had gotten a hold on Dan's arm that was like an iron clamp. He stuttered as he said, "There's no sense claiming I got guts," he said. "I don't have. But I'll go talk to the sheriff, McCoy. I can do that. There'll be a massacre if I don't."

Engle let go of him and tottered out into the moonlight. He kept shouting, "It's Engle—I want to talk to Jess Singer. It's Engle—I—"

Dan felt someone moving toward him, coming under the stairs. He did not have to peer into the gloom to know it was Diana Kemble. He could feel her presence as if he had known her all his life. She came up so close to him she touched him.

"You had your nerve—running off their rigs," he said.

She laughed at him and said. "I had to do something. You slammed the wrong door. You slammed the door to my bedroom—and the window is too small for you to climb out. I guess I'm the only one that would know the slam was my door, that you were inside."

Boye Engle had stopped in the yard not far from where Blackie Creon lay. By the yapping of the hounds it was apparent they were being brought to the ranch in a buckboard. The vehicle halted some distance away. After a while the sheriff's voice spoke up from the brush.

"You want me, Engle?"

"Look," Boye stuttered. "Lee's dead. So is Thumper—Blackie's out. The three of them murdered Pat Mills and you all damn well

know it." He could not say any more. His voice just petered out.

"You're a damn liar," the sheriff said. "Mills committed suicide. Now trot out that McCoy, Engle, unless you've gone over to the other side."

"I'm for law and order," Boye Engle said. "I've switched, sheriff, and the pay stops for the whole lot of you this minute."

He must have known what would happen when he said that; and without a doubt it was the single most courageous thing done there that night.

Beside Dan Diana said in a sudden outburst of breath, "Now—why'd he do that?"

A bullet whanged from the darkness and Engle staggered back a couple of paces before a second shot knocked him flat on the sod. Engle rolled over onto his stomach to prop up his pistol with his left hand and fire it with his right.

Then Diana Kemble let go with the rebel yell and the Running K charged.

Dan got his gun and ran across the open yard, past Engle, who begged him to come back. He found the sheriff and they fought it out point blank in the darkness. Dan's luck did not hold. He got a couple of smashed ribs and a long bullet furrow across his chest before the sheriff folded up. He wasn't sure of what happened after that, or who won.

But when it was over he could still walk as far as the ranch house.

HE WEAVED a little, drunkenly. He felt light in the head, too, especially when he passed Boye Engle sitting in the grass with Lovey Creon kneeling beside

him. Tomorrow, he reckoned, some day anyway, pretty soon, he'd get Engle to fix up the phony county records that had made a hollow city out of honest prairie and they would get an honest jury to give him a legal trial. In the meantime Lovey seemed to have him well in hand—Dan grimaced wryly. He had been right about one thing—she'd never given a damn about him.

Meanwhile he had records of his own to put in order.

Diana Kemble sat on the steps where the Creon girl had been.

"Look at them," she said in wonder, pointing toward the couple out there so close together in the waning moonlight. "She goes all out for you and—"

Dan stumbled and fell on his face. He managed to roll over, push himself up, and sit on the bottom step. Diana practically jumped down the whole flight to his side.

"Dan!" she cried.

"Mister Glee," he said grimly, "and it looks like I lost my girl."

"Dan—you're hurt! I'll—"

She jumped to her feet and Dan grinned at her. He didn't feel so bad now even with a couple of broken ribs and the grinding pain just starting.

"Thanks," he said. "The name is Dan McCoy, miss. I'm pleased to meet you. Was—the first time—ever laid eyes on you—"

Dan was very faint. Diana's eyes were deep as a bottomless mountain pool.

"Me, too," she said breathlessly. "Pat used to talk about you, Dan, and I—well—"

Then she was down beside him again.

"I'll tend to you myself," she said.



THE ANCIENT ALLAN

By H. Rider Haggard

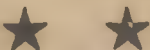


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GUNS OF THE BORDER RIDERS

By WILLIAM HEUMAN



He caught a weird glint of metal in the firelight....

CHAPTER ONE

Gun-coward

"A Texan is a queer critter, Brewster. You better do like they tell you—or this country'll be running with blood afore morning!"

THIS ranger barracks was a long, low building of adobe, reinforced with thick cedar timbers. There were two doors, one at each end, and several windows, small, shuttered, with portholes in the heavy shutters. The late afternoon sun beat against the adobe walls, sending off shimmering rays of heat. Captain Jeff Brewster, newly-appointed to this Farnham County sector of north Texas, stood in the west doorway, watching the small crowd in front of him.

He caught and categorized the various expressions on their faces. Martin Waring's



Crane's next shot brought the Indian down....

haggard perplexity, Janice Waring's blue eyes blazing with anger. Big George Dangerfield, ex-ranger captain, was standing with his hands on his belt, feet spread apart, bewilderment showing plainly in his quiet brown eyes. A dozen of the rangers were grouped behind Dangerfield, back near the corral, but close enough to hear every word being said. Jeff Brewster read the contempt in their eyes. Still, he had to do what he was doing.

Dangerfield said quietly, "The boys run across Iron Coat's sign up near the San Quintana. The devil has near forty bucks with him."

Jeff Brewster felt the sweat sliding down the small of his back. He leaned against the door post and tried not to look at Janice Waring. He was big, though not as big as Dangerfield who stood nearly six feet four in his boots. A pulse tugged at the small scar over his right eye, where a Mexican lancer had creased him three years before at San Jacinto.

"Ten men," Dangerfield went on, "ain't a hell of a lot, Brewster, to throw agin' Iron Coat's forty—especially the way he's feelin' now."

"You have your orders," Jeff said. "Carry them out." And he felt the sickness inside him even as he spoke. Martin Waring drooped in the saddle. His daughter, Janice, who had dismounted, stood as straight and as stiff as a ramrod.

Jeff Brewster's gray eyes dropped when she looked at him. George Dangerfield was saying stubbornly,

"An' you ain't goin', Brewster?"

"No," Jeff said. He didn't want any more questions, but he couldn't walk away from the big man. This was not the regular army. The ranger patrols had been hastily drawn together to protect the Texas frontiers from Indian attacks. They were not soldiers, and had never been, even during the war with Mexico. They would ride into hell itself for a

good fight, but they would argue with their commanding officers until they were blue in the face as to the best methods of attack.

A rider on a buckskin horse came down through the clump of willows north of the post. He swayed gracefully in the saddle, wide-brimmed hat flapping. His buckskin jacket was whitened with alkali dust, indicating that he'd come a long way. Jeff Brewster could see the fatigue lines around the corners of his wide mouth, as the rider dismounted, and pushed through the crowd.

"Any news, Sam?" Dangerfield asked him.

The scout looked at Jeff out of a pair of mild, blue eyes, and scratched his heavy jaw. He spat once, glanced at Janice Waring as if in apology, and said briefly, "Iron Coat hit up on the Antler. Wiped out Ben Hayworth's place, killed Ben an' his two boys, an' rode off with Ben's wife."

Jeff Brewster saw Janice Waring's eyes fill with tears.

"Reckon Mrs. Hayworth is dead now," Sam Crane added. "She wasn't young enough to travel with them bucks. Iron Coat's movin' pretty fast."

George Dangerfield stared at Jeff steadily. "The Antler's ninety miles north, Brewster. I figure he's headin' over toward the Valerde settlements." He spat and said shortly, "With the whole bunch of us goin' we kin give him one hell of a fight."

Jeff shook his head. "Your orders are to keep him in sight. Watch where he goes. That's all."

Janice Waring jumped into the saddle. Her voice was quivering with rage as she spoke.

"That's the most cowardly order I've ever heard a commanding officer give, Captain. President Houston shall hear of this."

Dangerfield told Sam Crane, through tight lips, "Iron Coat picked up young Jack Waring. The boy was roundin' up some strays south o' the San Quintana."

Crane nodded, eyeing Brewster quizzically.

Martin Waring turned his black without a word and rode after his daughter. Jeff watched them pass the group of rangers at the corral. One of the men said something, and though Jeff could not hear the words, he saw Waring shake his head.

"Kind o' tough on Martin," Crane observed. "That boy was the pride of his life."

"We'll hope he's rescued," Jeff said shortly.

"By sendin' out ten men?" Dangerfield rasped, "an' keepin' twelve here?"

Jeff Brewster watched the big man quietly. Dangerfield had betrayed no resentment when Jeff rode in with the brief order from the Secretary of War that he was to replace Dangerfield as the head of the patrol. He had cooperated the past three weeks while Jeff was getting acquainted with the territory.

"I kin see Iron Coat laughin'," Dangerfield growled. "He'll come back in the fall with a war party two or three times as big, an' he'll have the San Quintana runnin' red with Texan blood."

Jeff let his hands drop to his sides. "Be ready to ride in thirty minutes, Dangerfield," he said, and turned his back and walked into the barracks.

HE STOOD by the small window on the other side of the little room which served as his quarters. He had a bunk built against the wall, a fireplace with white wood ashes in it, a rough board table and two chairs. From the window he could see Janice Waring and her father riding out of the clump of willows, heading back toward their ranch.

He could visualize Martin Waring's next move. The rancher had four hands working for him—he would join up with Dangerfield's party when they rode after Iron Coat. There were no orders that could stop him. A man had the right to fight for his son.

Jeff heard the soft step on the beaten earth floor. Sam Crane joined him at the window, slowly building a *cigarillo* out of tobacco and corn husk.

"I know George," Crane said softly. "He'll jump them Injuns like a wildcat, an' Iron Coat will just drift away. Or maybe the chief'll turn around an' hit back at George. Then there'll be trouble."

"I want your full report," Jeff said without looking at him. Crane had been gone for five days.

The scout sat down in one of the chairs.

He said thoughtfully, "A fat man with blue eyes, travelin' with a band o' *comancheros*, tradin' with wild Comanches?"

"He'd have his hair dyed black," Jeff Brewster said impatiently. "There'd be another one in the party—a *gachupin*. He'd be dressed like a poor peon, but he's from an aristocratic Spanish family."

"That'd be the small one," Crane stated, "the chap with the cast in the left eye, an' the sharp nose." He shook his head disgustedly. "I went damn near as far as the Cimarron, Brewster, an' I covered plenty o' territory. I didn't see no *comancheros*."

Jeff Brewster grimaced, holding in the impatience that was in him. "They were last seen east of the Big Bear, and it was assumed they were coming west."

"Big Bear," Crane said, "is Chickasaw country."

"They were working along the Oxhead also," Jeff muttered. "They saw the Shawnees, and some Muskogee tribes."

"They ain't missin' anybody," Crane said. "Now they're supposed to be goin' into Co-

manche country." The scout spat into the darkened fireplace. "The fat man is the one Sam Houston wants," he said.

"Don Felipe Hermosillo is just as bad," Jeff told him, "but the fat man has the brains."

"Be no trouble down here," Sam Crane growled, "if the United States annexed us tomorrow."

"No trouble," Jeff smiled wanly, "but a war with Mexico. They've never given up hope of reconquering Texas. The war element down in Mexico City has been clamoring for another expedition north."

"Reckon the Mexican people don't want a war with anybody," Sam Crane muttered. "It's them damned *gachupins*—the chaps like this Don Hermosillo. They want glory." The scout stopped and looked at Jeff Brewster queerly. "What in hell does the fat man want?" he asked suddenly.

Jeff Brewster gripped the window sill with both hands and watched the tiny figures riding south.

"The fat man," he said grimly, "wants Texas."

Sam Crane laughed deep down in his chest. "Reckon he'd have to be a heap fatter—"

"If he's able to complete his work," Jeff said sharply, "and return to Mexico City, there's a good chance that he'll succeed."

Crane sobered, as if he'd just thought of something. "He shouldn't have any trouble with the Comanches. They hate Texans like all hell. Iron Coat's made a vow to kill every one he comes across." He laughed bitterly. "Since the devil picked up that old coat o' mail he thinks a bullet can't touch him."

"He's had luck," Jeff admitted. "He's been in half a dozen brushes with Ranger patrols and he's never been hit. How do you account for it?"

Crane shook his head. "I seen that Spanish coat," he growled. "Iron Coat bought it from a Ute. The Ute must o' had it in his family fer three hundred years since they took it from a Spanish *conquistador*. A slug from a Colt forty-five would go through that damned armor like a knife through cheese, but Iron Coat thinks it's big medicine. He'll take chances no Comanche ever took before, an' he'll get away with it 'cause he's been lucky."

Jeff nodded soberly. He'd seen the counterpart of this strange tale in the Texan army. A young chap, whose father and brothers had died at Goliad, and who had lost his wife from cholera, had wanted to kill himself. He'd ridden recklessly into every engagement, exposing himself needlessly to Mexican bullets, and had gone through the war without being touched.

He shook his head and brought his mind back to matters more at hand. "If Iron Coat

throws in with the fat man," he said, "how many Comanches can he command?"

"With his new medicine?" Crane studied him, thinking. "I'd say near a thousand. He'll go back to his people after this raid, braggin' about his iron jacket. A damned lot of Injuns will follow a chief who can't be killed."

Jeff Brewster chewed his lip and took a deep breath. He thought of the Ranger patrols scattered across this tremendous northern border—small companies, who were able to combat localized Comanche raiding parties, but nothing on the scale indicated by his appointment here. Matters had still been ephemeral when he arrived—many here still did not visualize their ultimate scope—but he had been warned by President Sam Houston himself. Having known what to look for, he had seen what was still hidden to others—and yet not enough for a concrete report. It promoted misunderstanding—prevented his getting full cooperation.

"I'll send out double patrols tomorrow, and the next day and the next," he said suddenly. "You'll move west this time, Sam, and stay out till you find their sign. That party is somewhere north of Texas, and we have to find them."

THAT was as inconclusive as the rest of his actions had been; yet it was all he could do. He went outside then and watched George Dangerfield's ten men saddling up. They were heavily-armed, each man carrying two of the new Walker-Colt six-guns, a rifle, and a Bowie knife. The horses were no thoroughbreds, but they could go all day in the rough north Texas country; they would not pull up lame, and they could live on tough buffalo grass.

The remaining dozen men lounged around the post, watching Dangerfield, watching Jeff Brewster. They were young, well-made, most of them over six feet tall, all of them single, haters of the Comanche, haters of the military in Mexico City, and anxious to prove themselves. Their attitude toward himself he could not yet gauge, but they were not pleased at being left behind.

Dangerfield came over to where Jeff was standing outside the door. "I'm ready to go, Brewster," he said flatly. "Any special orders?"

"If you see your way clear to rescue the boy," Jeff told him, "go to it. But I don't want to see this command annihilated."

Dangerfield smiled coldly. *Then why in hell don't you go along yourself?* his eyes seemed to say. He turned and walked away.

"Hell of a thing," Sam Crane murmured at Jeff's elbow.

The stocky scout moved on feathery feet. Jeff started, then said wearily, "They can

quit any time they want to, and they know it. If there was discipline, or rules in the patrol, they'd never enlist in the first place. These men want freedom, and they'll have it."

"A Texan," Crane said, "is a queer critter."

Jeff walked out to the corral when Dangerfield was gone. He spoke quietly to the men lounging there, watching Dangerfield's dust cloud. He gave his orders for the morrow. They were to go out in two's, with the exception of two men who were to remain at the post with himself. It meant that five groups would ride in different directions, looking for a party of *comancheros*. The orders were the same he'd been giving since he'd come to the post. He realized that sending Dangerfield off with ten men weakened his own searching force, but he'd had to make some gesture.

None of the men spoke to him. One spat into the dust. Flat-crowned sombreros covered their eyes, but Jeff Brewster could see their lips. They were tight, compressed, bitter.

Later he listened to the noise at the other end of the long barracks—a thin partition wall had been erected, separating his quarters from those of the men. He could hear things being banged around; he could distinguish swearing meant for his ears.

He did a little swearing himself.

CHAPTER TWO

Empire Stakes

BEFORE dawn the next day the five patrols were out and Jeff watched Crane saddle up a fresh mount, pack enough provisions for several days, and ride west. It was quiet at the post after that, and Jeff spent the morning writing a report. Sam Houston was waiting for first confirmation of his suspicions that Mexican agents were attempting to organize the Indian tribes on the border. The capture of Don Felipe and the fat man would set the Texas army in motion. Forewarned, they could break the Indian's strength before Mexico could send an army north to help them.

At noon a rider came in with a message from Sam Crane. The scout had cut south to pass the Waring ranch, and Crane's note stated that Janice Waring was alone at the ranch house, her father having left with the hands. Crane thought Jeff would like to know that. He'd suggested that she go over to the nearest neighbors—the Howletts, eight miles over on Saw River, but she'd utterly refused.

Grimly, Jeff saddled a horse and headed south at one o'clock in the afternoon. He knew why Crane had sent the note—it was more than possible that Iron Coat would

shrewdly double back over his own trail to confuse trackers and, doing so, he would surely hit at the Waring ranch.

The ranch was six miles south and west of the ranger post, and Jeff made it in less than an hour. He found the girl drawing water down at the stream. She had a Colt gun strapped around her waist, and a rifle close at hand. When she saw Jeff coming up, she stepped to the rifle and held it in readiness, only putting it down when she recognized him.

When he spoke to her, Janice Waring didn't answer immediately. And he sat his horse silently, watching her. Her auburn hair had been tied with a blue ribbon, Navaho fashion, and the ribbon matched the color of her eyes. She was wearing a corduroy shirt and a black split skirt. The blue eyes were flashing again when she finally spoke.

"You are the first ranger I've ever known, Captain, who was concerned about danger."

Jeff Brewster leaned forward. He said quietly, "I'm sorry about your brother. I suppose your father and the hands went with Dangerfield."

"There weren't enough rangers," Janice snapped. "Did you think he would stay home?"

"No," Jeff stated. "I knew he would go." "If he doesn't come back," the girl cried, "you'll have his blood on your hands also!"

Jeff bit his lips. Then he said, "I don't want yours. I can't order you, but you should ride over and stay with the Howletts until your father returns. I'll send one of the men over from the Post to guard the place."

"Thanks," the girl said quietly. "But won't you need him yourself—for protection?" She walked away, carrying the pail of water, the rifle under her free arm.

Jeff Brewster watched her grimly, then wheeled his gray and rode back to the post. Mel Warren, one of the rangers left on guard at the barracks, was repairing his saddle in the shade of the building. Jeff paused and said briefly.

"Ride over to the Waring place. Keep out of sight, but stay around until Martin Waring gets back. Miss Janice is over there alone."

The ranger looked at him, unsmiling, and nodded. Jeff walked into his quarters, his face tight, a tight feeling inside him. Sooner or later the tension had to snap—he would lose either his men, or his judgment. Yet he could not speak or act openly. A passing remark by a ranger might flush the quarry, and the fat man had to be taken.

At three o'clock in the afternoon he watched Mel Warren ride away, which left only himself and a ranger by the name of Ad Barkus at the post. Barkus played solitaire in the

barracks and Jeff stayed away from him. He'd rather have been out with Crane, searching for sign, but it was necessary that he remain at the post for the first reports. This quarry was too important to miss.

HE HAD the feeling as the sun started to drop behind the rim of the open plains, that the search was futile. Sam Houston may have been given the wrong steer. It was very possible the fat man and Don Felipe had already had their parley with the Comanches and were now heading west for Santa Fe, intending to return to Mexico City by that circuitous route, instead of striking straight across Texas. Moving that way, Jeff knew, they would have to travel many hundreds of miles out of their way, and if the mission had been successful the fat man would want to reach Mexico at the earliest possible moment. Traveling as a *comanchero*, he would attract little attention across the Lone Star country.

The sky was barred with color as the sun disappeared, and then the light started to leave the earth. Jeff Brewster felt the chill come into the air as a prairie breeze swept away the humidity. He heard Ad Barkus moving around on the other side of the partition, heard Barkus curse several times.

At seven o'clock he made a fire and boiled coffee. At nine he heard a rider coming in from the west, moving very fast. Stepping outside, he closed the door quickly and waited in the shadows, gun in hand. Barkus had come out the door at the other end, and Jeff heard the ranger snick his Walker to full cock.

Jeff Brewster listened. It was unlikely that the rider was an Indian because the Comanches rode only when there was a full moon, and they would not come with so much noise. This man was riding hard because he was in a hurry.

The rider shot past the corrals, slipping from the saddle with infinite ease—only one man moved like that. And then he heard Sam Crane's voice.

"All right."

Jeff put his gun away, felt the tension inside him break into excitement. He heard Barkus go back into the barracks, and called softly, "In here, Sam."

"Have one o' the boys look after that horse," Crane said first. He came into the light of the fireplace, and Jeff saw the fatigue in his face.

"The fat man?" Jeff asked quickly.

Crane's wide face cracked into a grin. "Run across their sign eighteen miles north o' the San Quintana," he said. "Eight o' 'em in the party. Follered 'em to where they camped in a draw two miles south o' Wagon Hill."

"You saw him?" Jeff asked eagerly.

"Both o' 'em," Crane admitted. "I got close enough to their camp afore headin' home. He's fat as a barrel—fat as you say—looks like a lazy peon. The little chap, Don Felipe, seems to be givin' the orders."

Jeff nodded. "Don Felipe is a fly," he murmured. "The fat man is the hawk."

"We kin git back there a little after dawn," Crane said, "if we start ridin' now."

"None of the other patrols came in," Jeff told him. "I'll have to leave Barkus at the post."

Crane scratched his chin dubiously. "Might be a little tough," he admitted, "if this fat man is as dangerous as you figure."

"We'll have to risk it," Jeff said. "They won't know what we're coming in for, and we'll have the drop on them."

Crane moved soundlessly out to the corral for a fresh horse and Jeff gave his orders to the sullen Barkus. Excitement had lightened his own mood, but he didn't let it show. In ten minutes he was riding west with Sam Crane.

At midnight they splashed across the San Quintana, only twenty yards wide at this point, the water in the black ford coming up to the horses' hocks, and Jeff ordered a stop to rest the animals. Sam Crane lit a *cigarillo* and took a deep pull.

"You figure they'll put up a fight, Jeff?"

"If they guess why we're coming," Jeff told him. "We'll ride into the camp and ask for breakfast."

"Breakfast in hell fer somebody," Crane observed moodily.

They spotted the thin trailer of smoke rising into the chill morning air hours later.

Jeff Brewster said, "I'll call the play. When I do, cover Don Felipe. I'll take the fat man."

Crane cleared his throat. "Better make your play pretty quick, Jeff," he advised. "Those chaps will be as jumpy as Comanche bucks. They'll know we're rangers afore we git close to 'em."

Jeff nodded. He rode straight toward the smoke column as the morning mists cleared. A small remuda of horses and pack mules, grazing a quarter of a mile from the camp, were being rounded up by a vaquero and driven in.

"They ain't wastin' much time," Crane said. "Reckon they figure on gettin' deep into Texas, past our patrols."

Jeff counted seven men in the company, besides the vaquero. The campfire was blazing brightly as they came down a slope, riding easily. They had not pushed the horses very hard the past hour and a half, not desiring to come into the camp with winded animals and arouse suspicion.

At a distance of two hundred yards they

were spotted. Jeff watched the sudden activity, then held up his right hand and kept coming in. Crane kept a few yards behind him. The men in the camp spread out a little at a terse command from a very fat Mexican who squatted behind the fire. This man had a tremendous pair of jowls. He had a huge head, the face so puffy with flesh that his blue eyes seemed half closed.

Drawing closer, his hand still over his head, Jeff Brewster saw those eyes dart back and forth, missing nothing. A small slim man stood nearby, a huge Mexican peaked sombrero low over his eyes. Both men were dressed in the conventional peon outfit—dirty white cotton drawers, sandals, a loose-fitting cotton shirt.

"Amigos," Jeff said. He heard the fat man say something, and the guns disappeared.

"Salud," the fat man murmured. He'd taken off his sombrero, and it was resting in his lap. His hair was jet black, but not greasy as was the hair of most Mexicans.

Jeff glanced at the group with him. With the exception of the slim little man—Don Felipe—the others were ignorant *comancheros*, dull of face. Looking at them, Jeff realized they had little more than two men to worry about.

THERE was no invitation to dismount. The fat man watched them without emotion, both hands beneath the hat in his lap, shoulders slightly hunched. Don Felipe was noticeably tense. He had a gun strapped at his waist, and his right hand hung very close to it. Looking at him more closely, Jeff could see that he had a cast in the left eye, and that his nose was sharp and long—the description had been exact.

Sam Crane suddenly sniffed loudly, a warning sound. Jeff saw two of the *comancheros* looking toward the south. The *vagwero* with the herd was calling excitedly and Jeff spotted the line of riders filing across a ridge more than a mile distant.

It was impossible to ascertain whether they were Indians or white men. He saw the fat man's eyes swivel in that direction, and he was sure the fat man was as uncertain as he himself.

He heard Crane moving off to his own right. The sound in itself was indication that Crane realized their danger fully—ordinarily the scout moved soundlessly. Jeff dropped his right hand down toward his holster—and as if at a signal a gun roared.

He saw the fat man's hat jump in his lap, and then the roar was repeated inside his head. His horse leaped with fright and as Jeff dazedly tried to control it, he knew that he'd been hit in the head by the slug from the fat man's gun, concealed under the som-

brero. He was a little surprised that he was still able to sit up in the saddle.

There was a haze in front of his eyes, and then he could no longer see the fat man. His horse shied away wildly, and another gun roared. Then he was holding on and plunging—he could hear Sam Crane yelling, but could not see him. He felt himself falling from the saddle, and then a hand caught him and held him up. He guessed then they were moving away from the campfire and wanted desperately to get his gun from its holster—but his hands were limp, and there was no strength in his body.

"Hang on!" Crane roared. He felt the scout's hand holding tightly to the back of his vest, and he knew Crane was riding close beside him, and that was all he knew.

He managed to get a hand up to his face after a while to feel the blood. There was plenty of it. He didn't know how long they had been riding when Crane pulled up and helped him from the saddle. He felt cold water splashed into his face, and then Crane bathed the head wound with a damp bandanna.

"Kind of a nasty gash," the scout muttered. "Our fat friend pulled a neat trick on us, Jeff."

Jeff Brewster sat with his back against a rock. The heat of the sun indicated that they'd come quite a distance since dawn. They were in a small draw through which ran a creek, a tributary of the San Quintana.

"Who were those riders?" Jeff asked slowly.

"Comanches," Crane explained. "I heard some of 'em yell as we cut away. Reckon the fat man didn't know—an' that was the reason he opened up. He figured on runnin' himself."

"They joined up with Iron Coat," Jeff muttered. "We've scared him off, and he'll head for Santa Fe now instead of crossing Texas. It'll be tough fighting against a Comanche escort."

"An' they still got that boy," Crane growled.

"How far are we from the post?" Jeff wanted to know. He could see from the position of the sun that it was approximately eleven o'clock in the morning. His head was still throbbing wildly. The bullet had grazed his temple on the left side, not quite knocking him unconscious. An inch more and he knew the fat man would have killed him.

"Reckon we ought to reach the post some time this afternoon," Crane stated. "If them Comanches'd known how fagged our horses were, they'd have come after us."

Jeff lay for nearly an hour in the shade. Crane rigged up with a blanket and their rifles, before riding back to make sure the Comanches had not trailed them. It was one o'clock in the afternoon when they started off again, Jeff's head bound with a handkerchief.

The throbbing had subsided, but he was still weak from the ordeal.

Sam Crane watched him slump in the saddle. He said quietly, "Reckon you could use a week's rest, Jeff."

Jeff shook his head. "We're going after Iron Coat and the fat man in the morning," he said. "We can't afford to let them get too far away."

"George Dangerfield must o' missed Iron Coat," Crane observed. "The Injun made a big circle an' come up along the San Quintana seventy-five miles north o' Antler Creek."

"That means Dangerfield should be back at the post," Jeff said, "ready to ride again."

"Unless," Crane muttered, "he run into one o' Iron Coat's ambushes."

Jeff grimaced. Dangerfield had gone out in a huff, anxious to fight. He may have been a little careless.

They reached the post at four o'clock in the afternoon, Crane traveling much more slowly than he ordinarily would have. Several times Jeff had to stop when dizzy spells assailed him. They spotted the jaded horses of the patrol in the corral as they came down the slope. A ranger by the name of Ed Burnside, was bathing a wound in the flank of one animal.

"They got it," Crane muttered.

DANGERFIELD was standing with several of the men outside the door. The big ex-captain looked at him queerly as he came in, hatless, his head bound with the handkerchief. Dangerfield had a long scratch running the length of his right cheek, the kind of wound which could have been made by an arrow.

"What happened?" Jeff asked, dismounting.

Dangerfield looked around at the other men. "Jim Collins got killed," he said grimly. "We got three o' Iron Coat's bucks afore they skipped. Our horses were worn out else we'd o' kept after 'em."

"Jim Collins?" Jeff said dully. He remembered Collins as a nice young chap, lean, taciturn, a good shot with a Colt. Like the other rangers he'd gone through the Texan war and seen plenty of action.

"Iron Coat had his boys hidden in a draw," Dangerfield went on without emotion. "We were lucky to spot 'em. The chief's armor flashed in the sun. That give 'em away." He was still looking at Jeff's wound, puzzled, and Jeff knew what he was thinking. The entire post thought they'd been assigned a coward as captain. The wound indicated that their leader had had his own little action.

"Anybody else hurt?" Jeff wanted to know.

"Couple o' scratches," Dangerfield ad-

mitted. "Fielding is in the barracks with an arrow hole through his right leg. Ain't bad though. We lost two horses."

"Comanches never could shoot straight," Sam Crane observed. "How about Iron Coat?"

Dangerfield looked toward the corral and watched Ed Burnside taking care of his horse.

"We shot at him," Dangerfield said.

Crane grinned. "You ain't the only one, George," he chuckled. "His day will come."

Jeff Brewster paused in the doorway. He said to Dangerfield, "We ride out at dawn. Pass the word along, George."

Dangerfield spat in the dust. "Iron Coat?" he asked.

"That's right," Jeff said.

"He'll be a hell of a long way off," the ex-captain observed.

"We'll follow him if he goes to California. He was heading that way, I believe." He went inside then, leaving Dangerfield staring after him.

Crane came in after a while to rebandage the wound. He made a broth and Jeff went to bed immediately. Pain had set in after the shock of the wound wore off, and it was difficult sleeping for a while. He didn't know when he went off, but when he awoke it was still dark.

He could see a figure in the doorway, and then Sam Crane said softly, "You awake, Jeff?"

Jeff sat up. "What time is it?"

"Another hour till dawn," Crane told him. "How do you feel?"

Jeff grimaced. He put both feet down on the floor and his head started to ache again. He waited a few moments till that passed away, and then he reached for his boots. His head felt as if it were twice its normal size.

"Runnin' up agin' some real trouble," Sam Crane said after a while.

Jeff looked up quickly. "What happened?" he demanded, his thoughts going immediately to the Waring ranch.

"Mel Warren just dragged himself into the post," Crane explained. "A dozen o' Iron Coat's band jumped him near the ranch house. Killed his horse an' shot him through the shoulder. He got away an' hid in the brush. Watched 'em burn the house an' take Janice away."

Jeff Brewster came to his feet, sick deep down inside him. "Where were her father and the hands?"

"Seems Martin Waring never came back to the ranch after he left Dangerfield," Crane said. "Martin's kind o' out o' his head. He's chasin' after Iron Coat with his three boys, hopin' to steal his kid away."

Crane lit a candle and Jeff could see his taut face.

"The boys are ready to ride, Jeff," he said. "We figure on hittin' 'em pretty hard this time."

Outside Jeff Brewster could hear saddles creak, and the low murmur of men's voices. George Dangerfield stepped through the door, a Colt gun on his right hip, and an army pistol on the left.

Dangerfield said, "They won't be travelin' too fast. Iron Coat's been on the move for weeks now an' his horses will be slowin' down. We'll have all fresh mounts."

"It's a long way to Santa Fe," Jeff murmured. "We'll catch up with them."

CHAPTER THREE

Hell's Ground

THEY picked up the trail at high noon. Sam Crane read the sign with little effort. The band of *comancheros* had joined up with Iron Coat's bucks, and all of them were proceeding westward, indicating that they'd given up the idea of cutting across Texas.

Very distinctly, Jeff saw in the earth the imprint of a small boot, and then of one slightly larger, even before Crane pointed them out.

"Janice an' young Jack Waring," he said quietly. "They aren't dead, anyway, Sam. The fat man won't let them be killed. They're too valuable now."

They made camp that night at the headwaters of the San Quintana. They were already in New Mexico, moving through Comanche country. Santa Fe was still several hundred miles to the west, and there were no Mexican settlements in between. The country was dry, rolling plains, with ridges of mountains in the distance. They had to pick their way through the chaparral, following the path the Comanche party blazed.

The second night out Sam Crane scouted ahead in the darkness, coming back after midnight with the laconic report that he'd spotted the Comanche campfire—and plenty of sentinels.

"If he didn't have the Warnings," Crane stated, "we could risk rushin' 'em, though. There ain't more than two dozen guns in the outfit. The rest of 'em will be shootin' arrows."

Jeff shook his head. "The fat man has a card up his sleeve."

That night Martin Waring rode in with his three punchers. Jeff Brewster looked at the man's haggard face and he knew that the rancher was aware of Janice's capture.

They were off again in the morning, and at high noon sighted the line of riders moving through a defile in the hills. The column stopped as several of the rangers raced ahead

and Jeff saw them spreading out in the defile after sending their horses on ahead. Comanche bucks were taking cover behind rocks, their brown bodies blending with the color of the earth.

"Hell of a funny business," Sam Crane muttered. "I never saw Comanches fightin' on foot before. Your fat *amigo* must be runnin' the show now."

"There'll be no going through that defile," Martin Waring growled. "Iron Coat has at least fifty men with him, not counting the *comancheros* who joined up with him. He can stay there and send for another war party. They'd be glad to take a crack at the rangers."

Jeff pulled up and watched this unorthodox procedure. He could hear the wild Comanche yell as excited bucks opened up with rifles from behind the boulders. The distance was far too great for a rifle ball and the rangers disdained returning the fire.

"Somebody comin' out," Crane said suddenly.

Jeff Brewster watched a rider spurring out of the defile, bearing a white object on a stick. He was waving this object back and forth as he approached. Jeff rode out fifty yards and waited for the rider. He kept his right hand on the Walker Colt.

"*Amigo!*" this man yelled. He kept waving the flag.

"Come on up," Jeff growled. He recognized one of the low breed Mexicans in the fat man's train. The peon spoke very rapidly, grinning all the while, revealing broken teeth. When he finished, Jeff rode back to the waiting rangers.

"What in hell they want?" Crane asked curiously.

Jeff tried not to look at Martin Waring. He spoke to Dangerfield, sitting on a roan horse a few yards away.

"They intend to kill the prisoners," Jeff muttered, "the first move we make toward the defile."

Dangerfield bit his lips and looked down at his hands. Martin Waring stared across the open plain.

"I expected that," he said slowly. Then he looked at Jeff curiously. "I'm puzzled to know who is directing Iron Coat's party, Captain."

JEFF watched a rider spurring out on the plains, a single rider on a powerful, cream-white horse. Tail and mane of the animal were decorated with red pieces of flannel. The Indian wore a coat which gleamed in the bright morning sunshine. He brandished a rifle and whooped defiantly several times before riding back to the defile. The Comanches in the gap picked up the cry, and

for a few moments the plains reechoed with the sound.

"Looks like Iron Coat's been polishin' up that steel jacket," Crane said. "I'm hopin' I git close enough some day to lay a slug into him."

Martin Waring was still waiting for Jeff's answer. Dangerfield and the other Rangers were close enough to hear, and they were listening also.

"A party of *comancheros* joined up with Iron Coat," Jeff said slowly. "They're trying to make Santa Fe, and if they reach there before we take them President Houston thinks there is a good possibility that the Texas Republic will fall."

He saw George Dangerfield's mouth open. Martin Waring was staring at him also, as if he were out of his mind.

"The most dangerous man in all Texas is riding with Iron Coat now," Jeff explained. "He goes by the name of Horatio Proctor, and he's an American."

"Horatio Proctor!" Waring muttered. "Seems like I've heard the name."

"Ex-governor of one of the states," Jeff Brewster said quietly, "impeached because of certain felonious practices while holding office. But a man who knows men—and can get men to follow him. Even Indians."

"What in hell is he doin' down here?" Dangerfield asked, mystified.

"Men like Santa Anna," Jeff explained, "have never completely accepted Texan independence, and they are determined to reconquer the territory before the United States decides upon the annexation."

"Does this Proctor intend to fight with Mexico?" Waring asked grimly.

"More than that," Jeff said tersely. "Proctor went down there with a fully-developed plan of reconquest. The whole northern border of Texas is exposed to Indian attacks—most of the tribes with the exception of the Comanches—are friendly, but they all resented the fact that they were shifted to the north at the end of the war. With the proper spark, and the right leader, all those tribes could rise at once and sweep unopposed into Texas."

Dangerfield stared.

Jeff went on, "And Houston wouldn't have the time nor the men to safeguard the northern border—the plan he suspects would keep him busy defending the south from a Mexican army, led by Santa Anna himself."

"What does Horatio Proctor get out of this?" Waring asked slowly.

"Texas," Jeff told him. "He's probably persuaded the army to make him governor if Texas is reconquered." He paused during the moment of silence which followed. "Our spies in Mexico City have informed us of the

plan. Proctor and Don Felipe Hermosillo, have been moving through the various tribes along the border, getting commitments from them. They're now headed back for Mexico City. If Proctor can give proof that he's lined up the larger tribes, the Mexican Government will be ready to move. The pincers will close very rapidly."

George Dangerfield took a deep breath. "That why you were sent up here, Brewster?" he asked.

Jeff nodded. "Houston wants me to bring in Proctor. If he's taken there is a good possibility the entire plan will fail. I was sent for that purpose only. I couldn't—" he paused and looked at Martin Waring steadily.

"I understand." The older man nodded gravely. "You're positive Proctor is with Iron Coat?"

Jeff touched the bandage around his head. "He gave me this—he's giving Iron Coat orders now."

"The most dangerous man in the world," Martin Waring muttered, "is the man who has turned against his own kind. He'll be as vicious as a rattler. If he says he'll kill my children he means it."

Jeff Brewster bit his lip and looked across the open plain again. Iron Coat was riding out again, shouting insults at them, daring them to come in and fight. It was a typical Comanche gesture. The high-stepping white horse carried its rider proudly.

Martin Waring cleared his throat. He said quietly, "As far as I'm concerned, Captain, there is no need to arrive at a decision. If Proctor is permitted to escape hundreds of families will suffer, possibly thousands will die along the border—even if there isn't war. I'm ready to make that charge."

George Dangerfield muttered something in his throat. Somewhere in the rear a man cursed gloomily.

Jeff Brewster turned to Sam Crane. "How close can we get to that defile tonight?"

The scout shrugged. The prairie grass was more than a foot high across the plain, and it seemed to extend right through the defile.

"All of us?" he asked.

"No," Jeff told him. "You and I."

Crane grinned. "Reckon we could git damned close—"

Jeff nodded. He said to Dangerfield. "We'll hit them at dusk."

The big ranger's jaw tightened, and he glanced at Martin Waring out of the corner of his eyes. Before he could make a protest, Jeff went on smoothly. "Divide your force and set the two groups on each hill forming that defile. When you hear us open up, come in fast."

"You goin' in there?" Dangerfield asked him slowly.

"Crane and I will make a rush for the prisoners," Jeff explained. "We'll have two six-guns apiece, which means twenty-four shots. We can do quite a lot of damage, and keep them occupied while you boys are driving in from either side. I think they'll break."

"We'll be there," Dangerfield growled. "Reckon these boys will go through hell now, Captain."

Jeff Brewster stared around at the brown faces. These border riders were taciturn men, but he saw the pride in their outfit in their eyes now, and it put a lump in his throat. He'd given them a bad time.

THE squad drew back another half mile, still in sight of the Comanches in the gap. Jeff noticed that Iron Coat had gone back. The open plain between the two parties sizzled with heat.

"Ain't much cover up on them two hills," Dangerfield commented. "Reckon we'd better walk our horses up after dark an' stay on the other side."

The remainder of the afternoon Jeff cleaned his own Colt and borrowed another six-gun from one of the rangers. He ordered two fires to be built at sunset. In the defile they could see half a dozen campfires springing up, red dots in the darkness.

Crane's eyes crinkled in a smile. He glanced at Jeff and started to sharpen his bowie knife on a stone.

"Won't be no moon tonight."

An hour later they were ready to go. Jeff ordered the fires to be kept up. He shook hands with Dangerfield and Martin Waring.

"We'll be seein' you."

On foot Jeff and Crane walked away from the campfires. The Comanche fires made a circle, moving toward the slope on the eastern side of the defile. The night was still warm, the heat of the day lingering, and no cooling breeze helping to dispel it.

They moved through the grass noiselessly. Crane, who was scarcely five feet away, was only a vague shape in the darkness—and a miracle of silence. Jeff's face was tight under its blacking. The Comanches had sharp eyes.

Halfway to the defile, Crane dropped to the ground. The fires were much larger now, and Jeff could see figures moving in front of them. They'd left their rifles behind because the long guns would have been too cumbersome for this business. He felt for the two Colt six-guns in his belt and then crawled through the grass behind Crane.

Sweat poured down his face as they drew in close toward the defile. Crane moved very slowly, pushing aside the grass, weaving his way through like a snake. Every few yards he would lift his head and survey the territory

ahead of them. Jeff could feel himself going up a very gradual slope.

They progressed a hundred endless yards before the scout stopped very suddenly. Jeff caught a glimpse of steel—it vanished, and then he guessed rather than knew that he was alone.

Raising himself very gradually, Jeff could see a Comanche sentinel outlined against the light from one of the campfires. A single feather dangled from the buck's hair. He was about fifteen yards away.

Drawing one of the Colt guns, Jeff waited. Ahead of him in the grass, something wailed softly, like a baby in distress. He saw the Indian stiffen. The sound came again, scarcely audible. The Comanche's rifle swung up, and he held it in readiness. Jeff drew a bead on the Indian's chest and waited.

There were no further sounds for several long minutes, and then the Indian started to walk forward, the rifle gripped in his hands, his sinuous shadow still outlined against the nearest campfire.

Grimly, Jeff waited for him. The buck took several steps and then stopped again, looking directly toward the spot from which the sounds had come. Jeff saw something loom up behind the Indian. He heard a low gasp, and then a moan. Both bodies went down in the grass, threshing there for a few moments, and then all was still.

Jeff inched ahead, crawling around the body of the Indian, until he came to Sam Crane. The camp was not more than seventy-five yards away now, and he spotted Horatio Proctor immediately, squatting on the ground near one of the fires. Don Felipe was talking with Iron Coat, a big Indian with a broad, thick-lipped face. The Comanche chieftain still wore his Spanish coat of mail, which came to his waist.

He probably sleeps with that damned thing on! Jeff thought.

Then he located Janice and young Jack Waring in the center of the encampment. They were sitting on the ground, back to back, their hands bound behind them. Young Jack had his head down on his chest, but Janice was looking around with fearless defiance.

They swung up higher on the incline, moving closer till they were less than twenty yards from the nearest fire. Jeff drew both his guns. He took a deep breath and looked at Crane. The scout solemnly closed one eye in his blackened visage.

Jeff started to come up out of the grass, both guns gripped tightly in his hands. He took one step, and then a rifle cracked from the opposite slope. He heard a wild Comanche yell, and then a fusillade of shots. The Comanches in the camp leaped to their feet, snatching up rifles and bows.

"Somebody spotted Dangerfield's boys," Crane grated.

The Indians were all looking toward the opposite slope and Jeff went down the grade in long strides, the ghostly Crane at his heels. Horatio Proctor was roaring something at Iron Coat when they broke into the enclosure.

Don Felipe Hermosillo saw him first, and the little Spaniard let out a warning yell. Jeff shot him through the chest with his right-hand gun, and kept going straight toward the two captives. Janice Waring had scrambled to her knees.

Crane's gun started to boom, and Jeff saw an Indian who had been leaping for the captives, knife in hand, go down in a heap. He opened up on two others who were going in the same direction, and hit one in the head with a slug, killing him instantly. The second Comanche swung his war club at Janice Waring's head, but the ranch girl dropped flat on her back when she saw the blow coming, and it missed her completely. Crane's next shot brought the Indian down.

Jeff had reached the two captives when a gun went off to his side, the slug plucking off his hat. He swung around, caught a weird glint of metal in the firelight, leveled both guns and squeezing the triggers simultaneously. Two slugs tore through the shining coat of mail worn by Iron Coat. The big Indian chieftain dropped his rifle and stumbled forward, burying his face in the red hot ashes of one of the campfires. He was dead before he hit the fire.

There were wild shouts from the slope behind them, and Crane roared, "Come on in, boys!"

Most of the Comanches were still scrambling for weapons, when Jeff twirled his empty right hand gun with all his strength into the dark face of a warrior, coming at him with a war club. Then Indian shrieked, and fell in front of him, his face broken, bleeding.

Horsemen plunged into the camp from both sides, riding down the Comanches on foot, firing wildly. Jeff Brewster saw Horatio Proctor running down the defile, and moving with surprising speed for a man of his weight—with Crane after him. Jeff leaped over a dead Comanche, took one step in the direction of Proctor, and then his legs were knocked from beneath him, and he tumbled forward, still trying to bring up his remaining Colt

for a final shot at the fat man. He had trouble lining the weapon up.

He saw a ranger closing in on Proctor and recognized George Dangerfield, high in the saddle, lifting his gun for a shot. Proctor seemed to sense this new danger and spun around, his round face tense and sweaty.

Proctor's shot killed Dangerfield's horse, but the big man leaped clear. He was shooting before his boots touched the earth and Proctor staggered drunkenly with a slug through his stomach. He tried to bring up his gun, but Dangerfield was still coming toward him, firing. Two more slugs half spun the fat man around, and then he went down in a gargantuan heap.

Jeff sat up dazedly, rubbing his right leg. A bullet had gone through it just below the knee. There were no more Comanches in the encampment, and he could hear the shrill Texan yell as the rangers tore after the fleeing Indians, firing in the darkness.

Sam Crane cut the bonds from the two prisoners, and then hurried over to Jeff. Janice Waring followed him. A man dismounted from one of the horses and grabbed at young Jack, hugging him violently—it was Martin Waring.

"You get hit?" Crane asked anxiously.

"Not bad." Jeff grinned. "They're still running."

"Dangerfield did in our friend Proctor," Crane said. "Now Sam Houston kin handle them Indian tribes one at a time an' teach 'em to keep their places."

Janice Waring crouched down beside Jeff. Her face was very pale, and a bullet had scratched her cheek, leaving a livid mark.

"I—I'm glad you came, Mr. Brewster," she stammered.

Jeff groped for words, and Sam Crane said mischievously, "Reckon Jeff's kind o' glad also, Miss Waring."

Jeff reddened perceptibly under his tan, but he saw the smile on Janice Waring's face.

"I hope Mr. Brewster has come to stay at the post," she said.

"He hadn't planned on it," Crane observed, "but he will now, Miss Waring."

"Now—" Jeff started to say.

"Stop when you're on safe ground," Crane warned, and Jeff saw the girl's eyes drop. He stopped!



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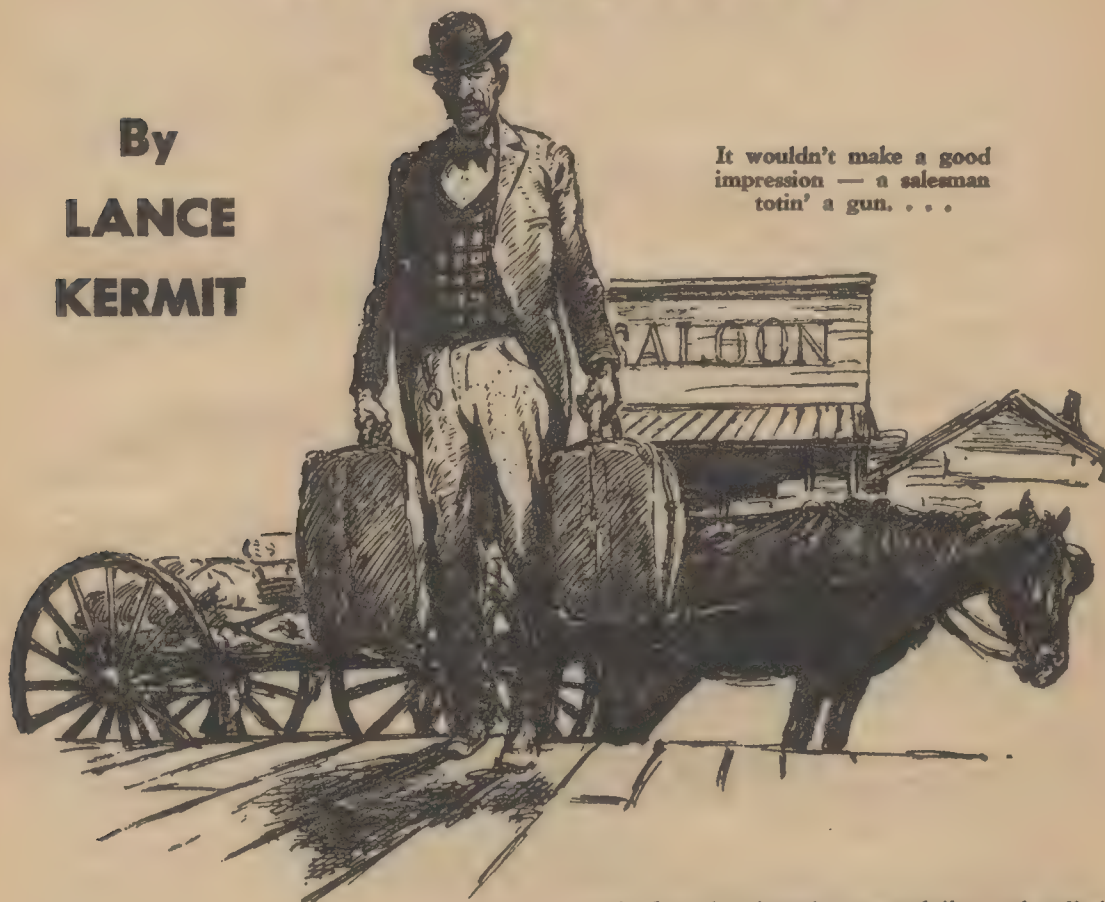
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MARK OF THE OWLHOOT

By
**LANCE
KERMIT**

It wouldn't make a good impression — a salesman totin' a gun. . . .



It's easy living—and powerful hard dying—when you're marked with the owlhoot brand!

CATASTROPHE AKERS, salesman extraordinary, guided his buckboard through the main street of Pike's Bend. In the back of his wagon was a fabulous array of articles he hoped to sell to the good people of this fair city.

He kept his eyes firmly averted as he passed Mike Clancey's saloon. He had some selling

to do first, he thought mournfully, and pulled his big bay mare to a halt in front of Wash Hanks' general merchandise store. He clambered to the ground, tall and awkward, and carefully knocked the dust from his black, spike-tailed coat, his brightly checkered vest and the shiny black derby slanted over one ear.

He unbuckled a worn Colt from around his middle and dropped it under the seat. It didn't make a good impression, a salesman toting a big gun like that. From under the same seat, however, he fished out a small, deadly der-ringer, and dropped it in his vest pocket.

He dug under some canvas in the back of the wagon, dragged out some suitcases and entered the store.

Wash Hanks' fat frame was sprawled in his reinforced chair near the back of the store. He didn't get up.

"Hi, Catastrophe," Hanks sang out. "Figured it was about time you showed up."

"Howdy, Wash," Akers said. "How's business?"

"Terrible," Hanks answered promptly, and began the preliminary stirrings and wriggings that would get him to his feet.

"Ain't it the truth," Catastrophe agreed mournfully. "I swear, I wonder how I'm gonna keep body and soul together." He lifted his cases to the counter and started unbuckling the straps.

"Got anything new?" Hanks asked. He heaved mightily and was on his feet, waddling around the counter.

"Nothing to speak of, Wash," Akers said sorrowfully. "Same old line of goods." He dug down in one of the cases and dragged out a small bottle. Long ago Catastrophe had cannily learned to display luxuries first—the necessities could come later.

"Here's something you might be able to sell, Wash," he said, with the characteristic lack of enthusiasm in his voice that had earned him his name. "Perfumy. All the gals are daubing it on themselves these days." He yanked the stopper and shoved it under the storekeeper's nose.

Wash Hanks sniffed audibly and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "Stinks to high heav'n," he grunted. "Put the stopper back in, afore that smell gits through the store."

Catastrophe sighed and shoved the bottle back in the bag. "How 'bout some dresses, Wash? Got the latest styles from gay Pay-ree—"

"If gold mines was selling for pennies, I couldn't buy enough to fill a tooth. And neither could anybody else in this town—right now."

"Huh?" The mournful look on Catastrophe Akers' face deepened.

"Fact," Wash Hanks grunted. "The bank was robbed. Everybody in this here town is busted flat, Catastrophe."

"Ain't that hell?" Catastrophe muttered. "Maybe Sheriff Potts'll git the money back? Has he got any clues?"

"Clues!" Hanks ejaculated. "Lordy, we know who done it—and they got him locked up in jail! Skip Bledsoe is the feller."

"Huh? Skip Bledsoe? You sure, Wash?" Catastrophe was surprised.

CATASTROPHE had known Skip Bledsoe since he was a button—and he had known Skip's outlaw father for years before he had died in front of the law's flaming guns. But Skip—he'd been brought up honest, and Catastrophe would have staked his last dollar against his turning wild.

"They found Skip's snakeskin hatband in the bank," Wash Hanks said. "And when the sheriff grabbed him, Skip offered to dig the money up and return it—if they'd turn him loose. Naturally, the sheriff said no, and Skip

won't tell where the money is—so there you are. Skip's in jail—and there ain't enough money to buy a drink floating around town."

Catastrophe began shutting up his sample cases. "Reckon I c'n sleep in a haymow till I make a few pennies to git outta town," he said sorrowfully. He left the store shaking his head. "Skip Bledsoe—I'll be durned!"

He was stowing his cases in the back of the buckboard when there was a quick flurry of feet behind him. Two hands grabbed him.

"Catastrophe! Oh, I'm so glad to see you—"

"Marian Malloy!" The sorrowful look almost left his face as he turned to face the girl. Then he noted her expression. "Hey, what's the matter with you?"

"Oh, Catastrophe, you've got to help us—I mean me—Skip—"

"Us?" The sorrowful salesman's eyes opened in understanding. "I knowed it," he said then. "That last time I was in town, I seen him making cow eyes at you—and you makin' 'em right back at 'im."

The girl blushed and fumbled nervously with a small diamond ring on her finger. "Then you know why I want to help him." She grabbed his coat lapel. "Catastrophe, he's innocent! But they won't listen. His dad's reputation is against him, and they take for granted that he would go bad. You'll help us—won't you?"

Catastrophe scratched his chin. "He claims he knows where the money is buried. How about that?"

"I don't care *what* he told anybody else," the girl said fiercely. "He told me he didn't rob that bank, and I know he's innocent."

Catastrophe tried to look as if he were thinking, but actually, he was eyeing the dusty sign, MIKE CLANCEY'S SALOON, across the street.

"Don't you fret," he said soothingly. "I'll get a little more information on this business, then we'll see what can be done about it. You run along now. I got a few customers to call on."

He angled across the street, looking like a walking advertisement for an undertaker, with his big black coat flopping about his skinny frame, and his long legs dangling awkwardly. For the second time that day, the sorrowful look left his face as he pushed the swing doors aside. He opened his mouth to sing out a cheery greeting.

But it was curses and profanity that greeted him as he stepped into Mike's place. Clancey himself was behind the bar, his big Irish face white with controlled anger.

Two men faced him across the bar. Catastrophe looked them over, and a faint tingle of warning rippled through his lank frame. In his devious wanderings he had learned to size up tough customers at a glance. And these were. One of the two was drunk; the other

almost stone sober. The soused one was reviling Mike with all the profanity he knew.

"You'll pay for ten drinks before you get another drop," Mike was telling him.

"Not that bellywash we been drinking!" the drunk bellowed loudly. "And you'll set 'em up or else—"

Catastrophe moved. The drunk one was fumbling for his gun; and the sober one, the salesman saw, was ready to back him up. For his lanky, awkward frame, Catastrophe's speed was unbelievable. In two quick strides, he'd closed the distance; one bony hand dipped for his hip pocket. It flashed up, then down.

There was a subdued *smack* and the drunk slumped down. The sober man whirled.

"What the hell—"

"Easy, friend," Catastrophe said softly. His derringer was staring the other right in the eye.

Mike Clancey dropped a bungstarter on the bar. "Catastrophe, you old horsethief! Right in the nick of time. But what the devil did you hit him with?"

Catastrophe was still watching the sober man. Now he queried softly, "Does this incident end—or develop into a brawl?"

The sober man was chunky built and had a scraggly mustache and pale blue eyes. He grinned a little sickly now, showing yellow teeth.

"My partner had too much under his belt," he said. "I'm obliged to you for stopping him before he got in trouble." He dragged the man to his feet and lugged him out of the saloon.

"Mike," Catastrophe said, "I subdued him with the handiest little gadget known to man. No well-equipped bar should be without one—not one, but two or three, stuck around handy." He held up the object for inspection. "A blackjack, it's called, and extremely cheap."

Mike hefted it and frowned. "Too light," he grunted and picked up the bungstarter. "This now—it's got heft to it."

"But Mike," Catastrophe objected, then sighed. "Aw, well, a drink out of that bottle you keep under the bar. I swear, I don't see how I'm gonna keep body and soul together. Here's how. Who were those gents, anyhow?"

"Coupla wild horse wranglers," Mike answered. "Been hanging around town for two, three weeks. One you slugged calls hisself Toke Yarnier. Sober one is Buck Slavin."

AN HOUR later, Catastrophe left Mike's place. He was full of pep and ginger. The church here at Pike's Bend needed new hymn books. He had just the hymn book they needed, and right now he was just in the mood to do a bit of singing to demonstrate. He'd get the parson and go over to the church where there was an organ—

"Catastrophe! Oh—and you promised to help me, too! Now look at you!"

"I'm working on it, Marian," he said stoutly. "I been gathering up all the information—"

She took him by the arm. "I can see that. The best place to get information is from Skip himself," she said firmly. "We're going to see him. But first—" She had been dragging him along; now she stopped, and Catastrophe cut his eyes around at the water trough by the sidewalk.

"Go ahead," Marian said, and Catastrophe sighed as he carefully removed his derby. He doused his head a couple of times, then mopped his face with a big red bandanna. He was placing the derby back over one ear, when he stiffened.

The friend of the hombre he'd slugged in the saloon was strolling up. Buck Slavin, Mike had said his name was. Catastrophe pressed his arm against his vest pocket and reassured himself as to the bulge made by the derringer.

But Buck Slavin didn't look mad. He was smiling at the girl.

"Hello, Mr. Slavin," Marian said. Catastrophe was puzzled, but his moody face showed no expression. "This is Catastrophe Akers," the girl went on. "He's a friend of Skip's and—and he's good at getting people out of trouble. He's going to see what he can do."

Buck Slavin grinned at Catastrophe. The salesman didn't grin back. He wasn't very good at grinning, and right now, he didn't feel like it. He wanted to get at those hymns.

"That's right nice of you, Akers," Slavin said. "Skip was a good friend of mine, too, and I been trying to help Miss Malloy prove his innocence, but I don't reckon I'm very good at that kind of thing."

When he had passed on, Catastrophe scratched his chin. Neither Slavin nor the hombre Catastrophe had slugged were the type to overlook what had happened in the saloon—yet Slavin had acted very friendly, as if nothing had happened. He turned to the girl.

"I've seen that hombre somewhere before," he said. "I didn't like his looks then—and I still don't. Where does he fit in?"

"He and his partner are wild horse wranglers," the girl said. "Skip was thinking about throwing in with them." Her voice grew bitter. "Skip sometimes had a hard time getting a job, on account of—"

"Here we are," Catastrophe said, and opened the door of the sheriff's office. Sheriff Potts dropped his feet from the desk and greeted Catastrophe effusively.

"I'd like to talk to Skip Bledsoe," Catastrophe said.

"Oh," the sheriff said sourly. "Well, you can, but 'twon't do you no good—nothing can

help that fellow. Why, he's confessed already."

Catastrophe felt a twinge of sorrow at the sight of Skip Bledsoe. His shock of blond hair was more unruly than ever, and his usually gay and carefree attitude was missing. The young rider was a dejected heap on the side of the small iron bunk in the cell.

"Can't be as bad as that," Catastrophe said, when the sheriff had gone. Catastrophe had prevailed on the girl to stay in the office. He was alone in the cell with Skip.

"It's worse," Skip groaned. "I talked myself into something I'll never be able to talk my way out of."

Catastrophe's face lighted up for a brief instant. "Then you don't know where the money is—you just got rattled and said something without thinking. Is that it?"

Skip shook his head. "Nope. I *do* know where that money is buried. I buried it."

Catastrophe scratched his chin. "Scuse me for being thickheaded," he said then, "but I just don't get it. Tell me what happened."

"I won't do any good," Skip said tonelessly. "Best thing for me to do is try and git a light sentence."

"I'd like to hear the story anyhow," Catastrophe said. "It ought to make good listening."

Skip took a deep breath. "The night the bank was robbed, something woke me up in the middle of the night. I been living in a one room cabin near the edge of town. What woke me up was somebody just going out the front door. I jumped up and followed. I forgot my gun. I never could see who it was, but there was two of them."

"H'mm," Catastrophe said. "And where did they go?"

"I lost 'em when they got close to the bank," Skip went on. "So I hunkered down behind the watering trough and waited. Pretty soon they showed up again, and I followed 'em again."

"Did they come out of the bank?" Catastrophe asked.

"I wish I could say yes," Skip replied, "but I can't be sure, although I *think* they did."

"Then what?"

"They went down near the stock pens and dug a hole in the ground. They put something in the hole, then covered it up again. I'da jumped them right there," Skip said, "but like I told you, I'd forgot my gun. When they had gone, I went down and dug up what they had hid."

"It was the money?"

Skip nodded. "When I saw what it was, I got panicky. Then's when I done a fool trick and buried it someplace else."

Catastrophe's eyebrows shot up, and he leaned over closer. "Jest a minute—you mean that the money is buried in another hole now?"

And that the hombres that robbed the bank don't know where it is?"

"Not unless they got to scratching around and found where I buried it. I ain't told a soul where I buried it."

A gurgle came from Catastrophe, a sound that those who knew him better would call a chuckle.

Skip sighed. "That's all—'cept in the morning they found my hatband in the bank—and when the sheriff grabbed me, I lost my head and blabbed about knowing where the money was—don't know why I done a fool trick like that."

Catastrophe was almost beaming. "Of all the fool tricks you done, Skip, *that* was the least foolish of all. Yessir. What woke you up was the gent coming in to steal your hatband to leave at the bank."

"That's what I figured," Skip said. "With my dad's rep, the least bit of evidence would throw suspicion on me for a job like that. Then when I said I knew where the money was buried—my goose was cooked, Catastrophe."

"Wouldn't say that, exactly," Catastrophe said, getting to his feet. "You just sit tight—never can tell what'll happen. Hey, sheriff! Lemme outta here!"

OUT in the office, Marian jumped to her feet. "Did you find out anything, Catastrophe? Did you—"

"Sheriff," Catastrophe said, reaching for his hip pocket. "I got a little device that every lawman should own. It's effective, it's handy and it don't need no ammunition—"

"Catastrophe!" the girl broke in.

"It's called a blackjack," Catastrophe went on. "And extremely cheap."

Sheriff Potts looked at the blackjack with polite disdain. "When I lose my senses and quit relying on a six-gun, Catastrophe," he grunted, "I'll look you up and buy one of them bump raisers."

Catastrophe turned back to Marian, reached the street, and let her drag him out. He sighed. "I'll go up to the hotel room and think this thing over, Marian. Don't you fret—"

It was almost dusk. Catastrophe was sprawled across his bed; looking like a bunch of sticks somebody had thrown carelessly on the counterpane. Every so often he roused up, stretched a bony arm for a pitcher of beer at the washstand and drank noisily. Someone knocked on the door. Catastrophe patted the pillow, beneath which lay his derringer.

"Who's that?"

"Me. Marian. Let me in."

"Hold on," Catastrophe said and reached for his pants. He jerked his clothes on hastily and let the girl in. "What's the commotion?"

"I've got awful news, Catastrophe."

The salesman looked skeptical. "Such as?"

"They've started looking for the money," the girl said.

"Who?" Catastrophe asked.

"Practically the whole town," the girl said. "Somebody remembered that Skip had said the money was buried. They know that Skip didn't have his horse out that night—so they figure the money must be close around town—and they can find a fresh-dug hole."

"Just why is that such bad news?" Catastrophe asked.

The girl's lips quivered. "If they find the money—they're g-g-g-onna lyn—"

"Here, here!" Catastrophe said sternly. He patted her shoulder. "Lemme think a minute, will ya?" He led her to the one rickety chair in the room, then perched on the side of his bed like some huge buzzard, until dusk settled into darkness.

Then he walked over to the girl.

"I want you to go tell Skip something for me. I ain't gonna explain it—just tell him what I said. Okay?"

The girl nodded wordlessly.

"You tell Skip to keep demanding half of it," Catastrophe said. "Just tell him that—to demand half of it, and keep on demanding half of it—right to the last! Now git."

"That don't make sense—but I'm going. I'm going," she said hastily, and hurried out. Catastrophe reached for the pitcher.

It was eight o'clock when Catastrophe paused again for just a moment outside the batwing doors to Mike Clancey's saloon. He patted his vest pocket where the derringer nestled; then patted various other pockets to assure himself that each pocket contained the things he'd need that night. With a final pat to his derby, he shoved his way into the saloon.

As he had guessed, most of the fortune-hunters had knocked off with the coming of darkness, and were now refreshing themselves after their labors. And most of them had already refreshed themselves plenty. Someone spied him.

"Hey, Catastrophe, come over and join us!"

Yells of greeting mingled with the other noises of Clancey's, and Catastrophe pushed his way to the bar, nodding to acquaintances, slapping friends on the back, yelling back greetings to those beyond reach. He slighted no one. He saw Wash Hanks and Jerome Meredith, the banker, and wedged himself between them.

"You might make a sale in a day or two," Wash Hanks said. "We decided not to wait for Skip to tell us where the money is, but find it ourselves. And when we do—" The fat storekeeper made an appropriate gesture, indicating a hangnoose.

"Why wait till then?" Catastrophe grunted sourly. "You know that Skip was right in town all that night, so the money must be

close by. Nossir—I'd string 'im up tonight and find the money later."

It had the effect of a bombshell.

Jerome Meredith protested mildly at the suggestion, but a burly cattleman, with plenty already under his belt, had overheard the remark.

"I'm for it!" he shouted. "That young whelp has lived long enough. String 'im up tonight—then take our own good time hunting that money!"

Meredith and Wash Hanks protested, but the cattleman was roaring out his argument for a quick lynching in a loud voice. Catastrophe waited a moment, until the argument was waxing hot—and a few more had joined in—then he slipped out of the knot of men.

He circulated through the crowd for a moment. Then, over in a corner, he noticed Buck Slavin and Toke Yarner. Toke's hat was sitting at a funny angle on his head, and Catastrophe wondered mildly if that were caused by a bump on his head. The two horse wranglers seemed deep in conversation between themselves.

Catastrophe pushed his way into a small bunch of men standing nearby.

"If there'd been any of my money in that bank," he said without preamble, "Skip Bledsoe would already been dancing a jig on air."

The challenge was taken up instantly by a none-too-prosperous looking rancher.

"That's what I say," he blurted. "Hell! That money can't be hid so good we can't find it. I say hang 'im now and find the money later!"

Another hot argument started. Catastrophe waited until it was going good, then slipped away. He patted his coat pocket, to assure himself that he hadn't dropped anything, then angled over to the two horse wranglers.

Buck Slavin eyed him sourly. "We ain't in the market for nothing," he grunted.

Toke Yarner glared at him savagely, but said nothing. It was what he left unsaid, that would have worried most men, however.

"You men hunting the money, too?" Catastrophe inquired politely. The surging crowd pushed him very close to Buck Slavin.

The two horse wranglers didn't appear to hear him, and Catastrophe noticed that each one was listening closely to the loud arguments over whether Skip Bledsoe should be lynched now or later. They were listening to those arguments, and eyeing each other nervously.

Catastrophe listened a moment to the arguments, himself. Those in favor of immediate lynching were getting louder and louder, and were drowning out the others. He mopped sudden perspiration from his high forehead and headed quickly for the back door.

Cold sweat was popping out on his forehead as he hurried down the alley. He felt in his

hip pocket for the smooth roundness of the blackjack, as he turned his steps toward the lighted windows of the sheriff's office.

FIVE minutes later Catastrophe slipped unobtrusively back into Clancey's saloon by the front door. He was panting and sweating from exertion.

He shoved his way toward the back of the saloon, just in time to see Buck Slavin and Toke Yarnar slip out the same back door, he himself had used a few minutes earlier. What was supposed to be a grin split the sorrowful salesman's face, and he leaned against the bar and ordered a drink.

Less than ten minutes later the crowd surged out on the street and headed toward the jail. Catastrophe followed leisurely. As he hit the sidewalk, something hit him. It was Marian Malloy.

"Catastrophe! They're going to—"

He grabbed the sobbing girl and hurried her down the street.

"They ain't gonna do nothing," he said fiercely. "Skip ain't in that jail!"

He spent a few moments quieting the girl, then stepped once more up the street. As he did so, a loud roar of disappointment told him that the crowd had found Skip gone. He breathed a little more freely.

"Slugged the sheriff and got away!" someone yelled.

"Get your horses, men! He can't have gotten far!"

"Fan out! Fan out! Everybody take a different trail! Somebody's bound to catch sight of him!"

The crowd disappeared like magic; only to reappear seconds later as a hard-riding bunch of horsemen. Horses thundered out of town in every direction, carrying whooping, yelling and shooting riders. Catastrophe continued his leisurely way to the jail, and when he arrived, found it deserted, except for Sheriff Potts.

The sheriff was stretched out on one of the cell bunks, and looked to be asleep. But Catastrophe knew better. He felt the small lump on the sheriff's head.

"Fresh air—that's what he needs," he muttered to himself; picked the sheriff up and headed out by the back door.

Once outside, Catastrophe stuck his nose in the air and sniffed long and strenuously. He moved back and forth for a few minutes, then headed down an alley, still carrying the unconscious sheriff.

A few minutes later he was in the vicinity of the stockpens. He sniffed again, then proceeded with more caution. He moved slowly around the pens and approached the blacksmith shop nearby.

With infinite caution he approached the smithy, until he was hunkered down near a

gunny-sack window. Voices, grim and tense, reached his ears. Catastrophe shook the sheriff.

"Wake up!" he implored in a whisper. "Oh, lordy, I didn't hit you that hard—"

The next words from the smithy made Catastrophe's heart leap.

"I want half of it, I tell you!" Skip Bledsoe said defiantly.

Catastrophe was fumbling desperately in his pocket. He dragged something out of it and rubbed his hand over the sheriff's face. The sheriff stirred restlessly a moment, then roused up. Catastrophe promptly clapped a horny hand over the lawman's mouth.

"Listen," he said tensely.

"Half, hell!" Buck Slavin ground out savagely. "Me'n Toke pulled that job—and we ain't splitting with the devil! Got that iron hot, Toke?"

"Yeah," Toke answered. "Set on 'im now—and I'll—"

Sheriff Potts was struggling to his feet—he knocked Catastrophe sprawling. With one yank, he ripped the gunnysack from the window.

Three startled pairs of eyes whipped around—to stare into the muzzle of Sheriff Potts' .45—and the deadly little derringer of Catastrophe Akers.

"Let Skip up, you two," Sheriff Potts snapped. "I heard enough."

"HERE'S a right purty model dress, Wash," Catastrophe was saying. "A dozen? Okay. Like I was saying—I figured if Slavin and Yarnar got scared enough that Skip was gonna be lynched, they'd get him out and try to make him tell where he hid the money."

"So you started lynch talk, then slugged Sheriff Potts so's they'd have easy sledding gitting him out."

Catastrophe nodded. "Of course, before that I poured some per-fumy on Buck Slavin so's I could smell which way they went—say, by the way, Wash—why don't you buy a few bottles of that per-fumy? Why, it'll sell like wildfire!"

Wash Hanks regarded the salesman darkly. "That per-fumy is what you smeared on Sheriff Potts' face to wake 'im up last night, ain't it? He still stinks like a Pay-ree madum-zell—take my advice and git outta town with that stuff!"

"I don't see how I'm gonna keep body and soul together," Catastrophe said mournfully. He stared at the unsympathetic face of Wash Hanks—then went to the door and stared at the sky.

"I work," he addressed it. And then he added a question, "And what do I get?"

There was no answer.

THE FREEDOM OF CRAZY HORSE

By **BUD SWANSON**



A nameless man made the bayonet thrust that avoided a war. . . .

*Born in violence, reared to kill—
such was the deadly destiny of
Crazy Horse, the Sioux raider no
bullets could tame!*

A MOMENT before the sleepy Sioux village was quiet, but now it was a bedlam. A wild mustang, berserk from loco weed, dashed madly among the rows of tepees. In one of the wigwams a squaw was giving birth to a papoose. All the able warriors of the tribe were on the hunt of buffalo, and only the old men, children and squaws remained behind. They scolded excitedly at the demented pony, and scurried about to escape its flying hoofs. The mustang reared back on its hind legs in front of the wigwam where the squaw was giving life to her child. For a moment it appeared the churning forefeet of the animal would flay the tepee to ribbons and trample the occupants.

A group of squaws ran forward, thrashing sticks and waving bright-colored blankets. After several attempts, they finally succeeded in driving the crazed mustang from the camp.

"Crazy horse—crazy horse!" the angry squaws shouted at the heels of the stampeding pony as it bucked across the prairie.

Thus it was that when the infant papoose was born he was named Crazy Horse. He was born in the shadow of violence, and it was destined that his end should be violent.

As war chief of the Sioux, Crazy Horse stood five feet eight inches tall. He was lithe and sinewy. A scar on his face served only to further accent his perpetually morose and belligerent mien. His war-like manner earned him the reputation of being a typically bad Indian, criminally inclined and thoroughly disliked by soldiers and settlers and not a few of his own breed. His few redeeming traits were his peerless bravery, a real military genius, and his flair for leadership in battle. He reached the pinnacle of his infamy in the Custer massacre at Little Big Horn and the Sioux war of 1876. Shortly thereafter he became a hunted Indian, and his days were numbered.

On June 25, 1876, after the annihilation of Custer and his Seventh command, the Indians split up in numerous small bands in order to bewilder the troops.

The winter was severe that year, and the weather rounded up more Indians than the soldiers. As the frigid blasts swept over the plains, the redmen surrendered in droves. Colonel Miles also captured a large group in Montana, but the real prize was Crazy Horse, who took refuge in the Powder River country, and resolved to stick the winter out.

"White man not come here," the Sioux warlord grunted. "Crazy Horse free."

BUT as the weeks passed, Crazy Horse had no alternative. In the latter part of February in 1877, he led his ragged followers—1100 men, women and children, half-frozen and starved—through a cutting blizzard, and arrived at the Red Cloud agency in Nebraska. A short distance away was Fort Robinson, headquarters of General R. S. Mackenzie and the Fourteenth infantry. As soon as General Mackenzie heard the news, he joined Crazy Horse in a pow-wow, and terms of capitulation were drawn up. Crazy Horse dissented on one point. He wanted to keep their string of fifty ponies.

"Red man not live without pony," he insisted.

"You'll live a lot longer than you can without meat," General Mackenzie replied. "We'll give you food, but you'll have to turn your horses over to us."

It was plain that Crazy Horse was of no mind to agree, but one glance at his wretched band, with their tattered robes and gaunt faces, presented too strong an argument. He looked at the general again, his moody face cloudy with resentment.

"Food for my people—ponies for white man," he growled and walked sullenly away.

Army rations were quickly issued to the hungry Indians, and they pitched their tepees on the bank of White Clay creek, about six miles from the agency. But still Crazy Horse was not pleased. He became more quarrelsome than ever, and wrangled constantly with his advisers and medicine men. In one heated argument, he made a bitter enemy of Little Big Man, his principal sub-chief. As a result Little Big Man mustered his forces and separated his faction from Crazy Horse, establishing a camp of his own two miles up the creek.

Everything was quiet until the next ration day came around.

Lieutenant Johnson of the Fourteenth infantry was in charge of issuing beef to the Indians. He was on the point of cutting out Crazy Horse's supply of meat when an interpreter informed him that Little Big Man wanted his cattle issued separately.

"What's the matter now?" the lieutenant asked.

"Little Big Man no longer brother of Crazy Horse," the interpreter answered.

"Well, it makes no difference to me," Lieutenant Johnson said. "All I'm trying to do is to keep 'em peaceful. You know these people better than I do. What would you do?"

"Little Big Man first."

"All right. Tell him to hurry and get his share. But I got a hunch ol' Crazy ain't going to like this."

And the Sioux chieftain didn't like it. When he heard that his enemy had been honored first, he was infuriated and refused to accept his rations. Angrily he rode back to camp, his followers trailing behind him. Hatred smoldered within him. Rebellion was in his heart, but he couldn't risk a chance now. Winter had beaten him once. Wisely he held himself in check through the long, cold months.

SOON the warm winds of the chinook whispered the first message of spring.

The snow melted from the hills and the water trickled down into the lowland and the tender blades of grass turned green. The smell of sage and wild flowers drifted in the air once more, fragrant, sweet-scented, tantalizing; stirring a primitive urge for the wild freedom of the old hunting ground. Crazy Horse felt it and it made him restless. It wasn't his nature to remain quiet and peaceful. Reports began to circulate around Fort Robinson that he was preparing to go on the warpath. He rode through his camp of one hundred and forty-six tepees, and marshaled a force of three hundred warriors. He started a reign of terror in the villages of Little Big Man, the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies.

"White man make ready for great battle," Crazy Horse addressed the Indians with eloquent propaganda. "Come under dark of moon—kill all our people!"

The Indians listened.

Finally the rumors became so alarming that General Mackenzie sent word to Crazy Horse to come to the fort to see him. But this was Crazy Horse's hour. He promptly sent back word that the general should come to the Sioux camp. The general summoned Crazy Horse a second time. An Indian runner brought back a reply.

"Crazy Horse sick," he said.

"He'll be a lot sicker if he doesn't get over here!" General Mackenzie roared.

The Indian runner shrank back and hastily departed.

The very next morning Crazy Horse apparently got up from his alleged sickbed to put in his appearance. The general talked straight from the shoulder.

"Listen, Crazy, I haven't any intention of making a night attack on your village. If war comes from this loose talk of yours, I'll come in the daylight to do my fighting."

"Want ponies back," Crazy Horse countered.

"No!"

Crazy Horse withdrew, burning with fury. Shortly afterward General Mackenzie was relieved of his command. General L. P. Bradley was appointed his successor. The new general stepped into a powderkeg. He had only been at the fort a few days when a soldier flung himself from the saddle, and burst into General Bradley's quarters.

"Crazy Horse is on the warpath!"

General Bradley quietly gave orders. The bugler sounded the alarm. The entire Fourteenth Infantry was readied for action. General Bradley decided to surprise Crazy Horse, surround his camp and take him back to the fort. Little Big Man volunteered his services in leading the soldiers to the camp of his rival. The work of surrounding the village, located in a hollow of the prairie, was painstakingly executed. An old brass cannon—the only artillery piece at Fort Robinson—was clumsily set into position. The camp itself was blocked from view by a ridge. When the order came to charge, the soldiers crossed the ridge, but not a tepee was in sight!

The soldiers returned to the fort rather shamefaced. There was nothing more to do but wait. Presently one of Crazy Horse's own men, disgruntled at his chief's domineering attitude and seeking the white man's favor, walked into the fort on a mission of betrayal. He said Crazy Horse was hiding out at the Spotted Tail agency, waiting for events to cool off, and watching for a more opportune time to go on the warpath. Upon hearing this,

General Bradley immediately wired the Spotted Tail agency. Crazy Horse was escorted back to the fort by two troops of cavalry.

There was great excitement as the proud leader of the Sioux came into sight. Many of his loyal subjects were ready to champion his cause. By the same token members of Little Big Man's party were just as eager to see Crazy Horse put out of the way. The resultant friction brought the friendlies into the mounting pandemonium, and they began stripping off their clothing for battle.

Before open hostilities commenced, Captain Kinnington, officer of the day, grabbed Crazy Horse by the arm and began marching him to the guardhouse, a short distance away. They walked through a line of glowering Indians and soldiers with fixed bayonets. At sight of the prison with its grated bars and iron door, Crazy Horse lost his poise and faltered momentarily. Seeing his supreme moment, Little Big Man sprang forward, seized Crazy Horse's other arm, and fell into step.

SUCH effrontery by his enemy was too much for Crazy Horse. A muffled sob died deep in his throat, and a weird cry bubbled from his lips. With a twist of his supple body and a mighty lunge, he tossed Captain Kinnington in one direction and Little Big Man in the other. A long butcher knife dropped from his sleeve into his hand.

He slashed savagely at Little Big Man, cutting the latter's wrist. But Little Big Man was game. He flung himself at Crazy Horse, struggling to pin his arms. The guard closed in, forming a circle around the two Indians as they fought.

A shot would have started a massacre. Soldiers and Indians pushed and shoved. They collided into one another, jockeying for position to better view the spectacle. Curses filled the air. Indian calls rang out. Sharp-pointed sticks ringed the circle of battle. A knife glinted in the late sun. The death-lock of the two redmen surged across the parade ground like a plague, sweeping every human being into the imbroglio, and threatening the entire fort. No time for clear thinking now. It was an occasion that demanded swift action.

Suddenly Bill Gentles, veteran of the Fourteenth, delivered a thrust of his bayonet. It was done so rapidly so adroitly, with his gun held at the carry in the next instant, that no one knew exactly what happened. But the act probably saved the day. A strange look crept across Crazy Horse's face. His shirt and leggings grew wet and bloodstained. Little Big Man backed fearfully away. Then Crazy Horse gave a deep groan, staggered forward, and crumpled in the dust.

And at last Crazy Horse was free.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

WESTERNERS and *amigos* in spirit, here's a chance to learn how you rate. Below are listed twenty questions on cowpunchers and ranching topics. Try your luck with them, and see how many you can hold the jerk line over. Call the turn on eighteen or more of them, and you're a sagebrusher from way back. Get at least sixteen right, and absolutely nobody can call you a yack. Pitch your line over fifteen, and you're still not in the amateur class. *Mucha suerte, amigos!*

1. What is the real meaning of the Western slang term, "couldn't drive nails in a snowball"?

2. If an old-time Western friend of yours said he was going after an "Arkansas toothpick," you would know he was seeking: A toothpick? A pitchfork? A large sheath knife? A wagon tongue? A long piece of wood?

3. According to real Western standards, what is the difference between a brand blotcher and a brand blotter?

4. True or false? A calico pony is a piebald or spotted pony.

5. What is a yack?

6. If you heard a renowned Western badman say he had a touch of the "climate fever," you would know: He was afraid to stay in the immediate neighborhood for fear someone would shoot him? He was suffering from the ague? He had the wanderlust?

7. True or false? The term, dice house, is a cowboy expression meaning bunk house.

8. True or false? A draw is a small canyon or dry stream bed.

9. What is the difference between a hard-case and a hard-tail—according to the Western's way of thinking?

10. In the language of the Westerner, a

"hot roll" is: A cowboy just in town from the range who has a lot of money? Something you buy in a bakery shop? A roll of camp bedding? A load of hay?

11. Where and under what circumstances would you find a line camp?

12. True or false? The term, mangana, refers to the act of roping a livestock animal by the front feet and throwing him to the ground.

13. True or false? According to the Texas version, a rustler is a person who is energetic, and an all-around good worker.

14. A lot of us are familiar with the term "punch," as it is applied to cattle or livestock. However, can you explain what it really means?

15. What is pine straw?

16. What would you be apt to find in a stackyard?

17. What is the purpose of "thumbing" a horse, and how is it done?

18. According to the cowpuncher's version, what is the tall grass country?

19. What is the meaning of the Western slang term, "works"?

20. What is the usual Western pronunciation of the word, *remuda*?

(Answers on page 109)

TALES of the

by LEE

ELFEGO BACA (SHOOTIN' SHERIFF OF SOCORRO)

ELFEGO BACA-- SHERIFF, LAWYER AND GUN-FIGHTER--PROBABLY WROTE AS BOLD A PAGE AS ANY IN THE RIP-SNORTING RECORD OF THE OLD WILD WEST

BORN IN NEW MEXICO IN 1864 HIS CAREER OF ADVENTURE AND BLOODSHED BEGAN AT THE AGE OF 1 WHEN RAIDING NAVAJOS RAN OFF WITH HIM, BUT RETURNED HIM UNHARMED A FEW DAYS LATER.

WHILE STILL IN HIS EARLY TEENS ELFEGO ENGAGED IN A CONTEST WITH BILLY THE KID TO SEE WHO COULD SHOOT OUT THE MOST LIGHTS IN AN ALBUQUERQUE HURDY-GURDY PALACE IN THE SHORTEST TIME.

APPOINTED A DEPUTY OF SOCORRO COUNTY AT 19, ONE OF HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENTS WAS THE ARREST OF A COWBOY LAW-BREAKER. SOME 80 OF THE LATTER'S PALS CAME TO THE RESCUE. BACA BARRICADED HIMSELF IN AN ADOBE BARN AND STOOD THEM OFF FOR 2 DAYS, KILLING 4 IN THE PROCESS.

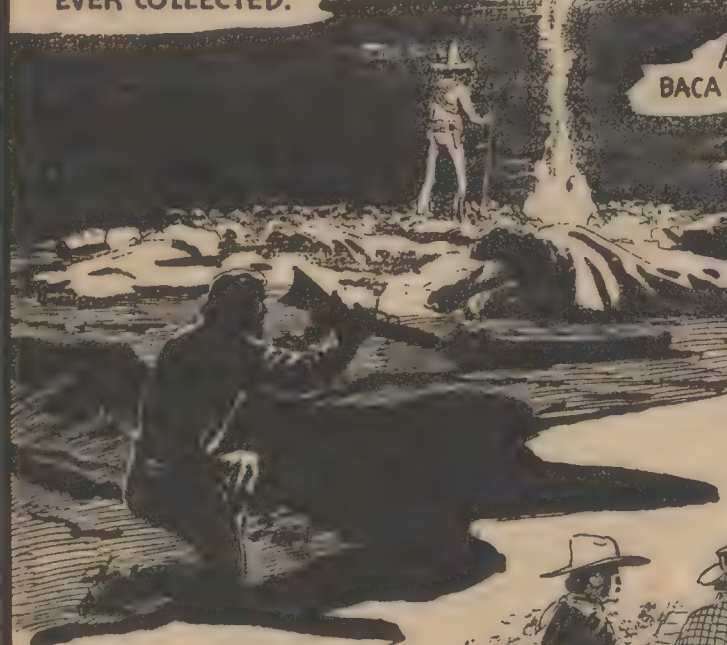
ON THE SHERIFF'S PROMISE TO LET HIM KEEP HIS GUNS, ELFEGO GAVE HIMSELF UP AND BECAME THE NEW COUNTY JAIL'S FIRST PRISONER. (YEARS LATER WHEN THE BUILDING WAS TORN DOWN, ADMIRING FELLOWTOWNSMEN PRESENTED HIM WITH ITS DOOR AS A SOUVENIR.)

OLD WEST



BACA WAS ABSOLVED OF THE KILLINGS AND SHORTLY ELECTED SHERIFF HIMSELF. HE AT ONCE WROTE LETTERS TO ALL THE WANTED BADMEN IN THE COUNTY, WARNING THEM TO SURRENDER THEMSELVES OR BE SHOT ON SIGHT. MANY HASTENED TO COMPLY.

CRONIES LIKED TO TELL HOW ELFEGO, OUT OF SHEER BRAVADO, SNITCHED PANCHO VILLA'S PRIZE RIFLE AND THE BANDIT LEADER, FURIOUS, PUT A \$30,000 PRICE ON HIS HEAD, WHICH NO ONE EVER COLLECTED.



ADMITTED TO THE BAR, BACA HUNG UP HIS SIX-GUNS AND TURNED HIS TALENTS TO SAVING LIVES, WINNING ACQUITTALS FOR 19 ACCUSED SLAYERS. HE ALSO RAN FOR GOVERNOR, BUT WAS DEFEATED.



ELFEGO BACA, WHO ADMITTED 9 KILLINGS IN THE COURSE OF HIS COLORFUL CAREER, DIED THE OTHER DAY-- WITH HIS BOOTS OFF -- AT THE RIPE OLD AGE OF 80.

CLOSE SHAVE AT SURVEY



By
**JOSEPH
CHADWICK**

As he fell, he heaved the
bottle. . . .

ED WILEY possessed the average man's decent instincts, but now, convinced of Ross Langley's guilt, he was gripped by an impulse to be not only judge and jury, but executioner as well. *The slip of his razor, the quick severing of the man's jugular vein. . . .* Ed Wiley's hand trembled. The razor nicked, drew blood.

"Watch it, barber," growled the man in the chair. "I want a shave, not a surgical operation!"

"Sorry," Ed Wiley lied. "Dull blade."

He reached for the strop, began putting on an edge that the razor did not need. He could see himself in the shop's wall mirror—and knew he hadn't the nerve to go through with it. His face, a too solemn face for a man but

*Cutting another man's throat is easy
—for a good barber . . . but cutting
your own comes harder!*

thirty-two, was pale. His eyes had a scared look. No, he wouldn't kill Rose Langley. He would let the man leave the chair and walk from the shop, and go on with his tinhorn swindle of the town of Survey. And, like a coward he would watch the sharper at his game—the only townsman knowing that Ross Langley, alias Duke Mowry, ex-convict and habitual criminal, was making a gigantic kill.

Ross Langley said, "That blade should be sharp enough."

He had raised his handsome head, so that he could see Ed Wiley in the glass. Their glances met and locked, then Langley's dark eyes narrowed down. "I knew you somewhere, before. Where was it?"

Ed Wiley was shaken to the core; for the first time in nearly a year, someone had probed at his past. He moistened his lips, and said, "I've barbered in a dozen different towns."

"Never mind. Get to work. I'll remember—"

A threat? Ed Wiley did not know. He quickly finished shaving Langley. He righted the chair, combed the man's thick dark hair, removed the cloth. Langley left the chair, put on collar and tie, hat and coat. He flipped Ed Wiley a quarter, said, "Keep the change," and turned to the door.

Ed Wiley said, "Mr. Langley—"

The man turned, frowning. "What?"

"That stock you're selling," said Ed Wiley. "I have a little money saved up, and maybe I'll invest it." He thought he detected a gleam of interest in the dark, shrewd eyes. "You're sure that stock is a good buy?"

Now Ross Langley smiled, patiently as a man might smile at a backward child. "You've heard of the Paradise Mine, friend," he said. "It's as solid as the government mint. Paradise Mine stock is on the market now because the company is opening a new claim—Paradise Number Two. It's the best buy in the world, my friend. But don't take my word for it. Go to your local banker and ask his opinion."

Ross Langley nodded pleasantly, turned and went out.

Troubled, Ed Wiley moved to his open doorway and looked out upon Survey's main street. It was a short street in a small town; it was lined mostly with frame houses and false-fronted business places, and boasted only three or four brick buildings. Survey was not much, as towns go, but for many people it was the hub of the universe. And if a man can love a town, Ed Wiley loved Survey.

Even now, eight months since he had settled there, Ed Wiley doubted that any of the townsfolk knew of his past. He had arrived in Survey *after* the prison pallor was gone from his face; he had put out a cautiously worded story that he had come from a Nevada boom-town which had petered out, and it had been accepted without question. But he knew—and this was his haunting fear—that if his past became known he no longer would be welcome in a community which had passed through its lawless era and grown staid and straight-laced.

He had had a sense of peace, a feeling of security—until the coming of Ross Langley to Survey. But in the three weeks of Langley's presence, the man had not remembered

Ed Wiley—even though the two of them had been in Yuma Prison at the same time. If Langley had turned straight, as had Ed Wiley, there would have been no need to worry. But Ross Langley was a born crook, once again pulling one of his tinhorn games. Langley, as Duke Mowry, had been in Yuma for a swindle that hadn't worked. It, too, had been a mining-stock swindle involving counterfeited stock certificates. That time Langley had been caught, but this time—who was there to stop him? Not Ed Wiley, who was afraid that if he talked, his own past would be unknown!

Now Ross Langley reappeared from the post office with his mail in his hand. He greeted people with a friendly nod, a pleasant word, an ingratiating smile. He reached Martha Rand's green-painted frame house just as she appeared in her doorway and started her six-year-old son, Donnie, off for school. He stopped, removed his hat with a flourish, patted the boy's head, then turned to the mother.

Ed Wiley felt a sharp pang of anger, seeing the smile Martha Rand gave Langley. He could hate Ross Langley for that alone, for winning a smile from Martha Rand. She was a pretty woman, a widow of five years. She lived there in the small house with her boy and, to busy herself and not think too much of her widowhood, she worked for people with needle and thread. She was not forced to be a seamstress, for George Rand, a store owner, had left her fairly well off. All that Ed Wiley knew, for he and Martha Rand had been friends.

Jealous?

Yes, Ed Wiley was jealous. As a barber, there were kinds of competition he could not meet. And he was not handsome, had no manners to match Ross Langley, who made a living out of his. It would have taken him another year of work to save enough to ask Martha to marry him.

Ed thought, *I ought to tell Martha what Langley is, warn her. . .* But who was he to talk up, to cast the first stone? The truth was that Ed Wiley was no better, if no worse, than Ross Langley!

A BARBER learns much of the affairs of other men. That morning Ed Wiley shaved a local merchant, cut the hair and trimmed the mustache of a bartender, and worked on a rancher who hadn't been duded up for two months. The three men were in the shop at the same time. They talked. Ed listened.

Sam Brandt, the merchant, said, "Yes, I'm buying Paradise Number Two." He talked in the loud, confident way of a businessman. "A good investment."

Rancher Mike Hatch said, "Me, I'm risking a thousand dollars."

And Pat McGrew said, "Something good, eh? Maybe I should get in on it. I've got a couple hundred in my poke."

They talked a lot more, repeating some of the claims for the mining stock as spread around by Ross Langley. The stock was selling at twenty dollars a share; it should climb to fifty, once the new mine was in actual operation. People who owned stock in the original Paradise Mine had made fortunes. The Paradise Mining Company was a reputable concern—Langley had built well.

Finally Ed Wiley said, "You gents sure of this broker, Langley? I mean, has anybody investigated him? Bad business, taking a man at this own word."

The three men stared at him, annoyed. Two of them having already invested money and the other convinced that he should buy some of the stock, they did not like to have Ross Langley and his offering doubted. Sam Brandt said shortly, "Banker Jason Walton is buying Paradise for his bank. That should prove Langley is all right. Walton is a cautious man."

Mike Hatch said, "You know anything against Mr. Langley, Ed?"

It was up to Ed Wiley, then. Now he had his chance to spoil Ross Langley's game—and save the town of Survey a fleecing. He tried to speak up, but grew tongue-tied. He had no proof—other than his own past.

When he finally could speak, the words that came out were, "I reckon not."

BUT there had to be a way. When the shop cleared of customers, Ed Wiley took off his white jacket. He put on his hat and headed for the Survey Bank. It occupied one of the town's few brick buildings, and was known as a sound institution. Entering, Ed asked a teller if he might see Jason Walton.

Jason Walton was a stout, florid man of late middle age. He was friendly of manner, but his shrewd eyes hinted that he would not be easy to fool. He invited Ed to sit down, asked him what was on his mind. Ed Wiley picked his words with care.

"I have three—four hundred dollars, Mr. Walton," he said. "Everybody is talking about mining stock, and I thought I'd ask your advice for myself. You think Paradise stock is good?"

"It's gilt-edge, Ed," the banker said. "I've just bought a block of fifty shares for myself. Does that answer your question?"

"In a way," said Ed Wiley, hesitantly. "But once I knew a man, back in St. Louis, who bought stock in a railroad. Paid a good price, too. The stock turned out to be no

good. . . ." This was an invention; Ed was trying to plant a seed of suspicion in the banker's mind. "The stock wasn't worth the paper it was printed on. It was—counterfeit!"

Jason Walton chuckled. "Ed, you sure are suspicious. You should have been a banker, instead of a barber. Counterfeit? That will be a good one to tell Ross Langley!"

Ed almost choked on his disappointment. He stood up, smiled feebly and said, "Please don't mention it to Mr. Langley." And he quickly left the bank.

On his way back to the shop, Ed almost bumped into Martha Rand as she came from Brandt's general merchandise store. He had been walking along, lost in thought, his gaze on the board sidewalk.

"Why, Ed," Martha said, laughing, "you'd walk right over a person. Your mind must be a thousand miles away."

He halted, tried to smile as he took off his hat. He stammered an apology and, as always when looking upon this attractive woman, he was gripped by an inner excitement. Her prettiness, even in a gingham dress, was something to be remarked about, and he said, "You are looking well, Martha."

"Oh, Ed! What is wrong with you? You talk and act as though we were no more than strangers." Martha's smile had faded—she was studying him soberly now. "Donnie and I don't see anything of you any more."

"Reckon I've been busy."

"Busy," said Martha, chidingly, "or angry, Ed?"

Ed Wiley wasn't sure of that. He said, "Langley is a handsome dude, and he has a way with women. But are you sure he is to be trusted, Martha? I mean—"

He saw too late that he had said the wrong thing. Martha Rand had spirit, and showed it now. Her eyes flashed angrily. "Trust Ross Langley?" she said sharply. "I certainly do trust him. He's kind and clever—and he loves Donnie. He's convinced me that the boy must have all the opportunity in the world—a good education, college, a chance to be somebody important when he grows up. He's advised me—oh, what is the use of talking! You just don't understand, Ed."

She swung about and was gone with an angry swirl of her skirts, leaving Ed Wiley more forlorn than he ever had felt in his life.

THAT evening after shop hours he sat in the back room that was his living quarters and laboriously penned a letter to the Paradise Mining Company, at Virginia City. He asked to be informed by return mail if the company had a representative named Ross Langley. It was a harmless inquiry, a businesslike letter, but Ed had a feeling that it was a coward's way of getting at a man.

He had no right to rake up another man's past and leave his own hidden.

He posted the letter the next morning, so that it would leave by the noon stage. He could expect a reply within a week, no sooner, and now all that he could do was to pray that Ross Langley would not abscond in the meantime. That same afternoon—a Friday afternoon—Donnie Rand came into the shop for a haircut, after school let out.

The boy had a quarter clutched tightly in his hand. He was a tow-headed youngster, the friendliest small boy Ed Wiley ever had known. He climbed onto the chair and said, imitating an oldster, "Shave and a haircut, Ed."

"Sure thing, mister. Getting all slicked up, eh?"

"Going on a trip," the six-year-old said proudly. "Me and ma, we're going away. Yeah; and we're going to be rich, too. Rich as anything!"

Ed's clippers stopped working. The boy saw how startled he looked.

"Surprised, Ed?"

Ed nodded jerkily. He was surprised—and scared. Martha and Donnie going away could mean but one thing.

Ed finished cutting the boy's hair, soaked it with lilac tonic, and combed it down slick. He removed the cover, and said, "When are you leaving, Donnie?"

"Tomorrow, Ed. Tomorrow is Saturday."

The boy handed over his quarter, and Ed gave him the barber-pole peppermint stick that was a youngster's reward for having a haircut. He watched Donnie head for home at a run, and he was so shaken that his hands trembled. His letter would do no good, now. Ross Langley was ready to make his getaway, not only with thousands of dollars in loot—but with Martha Rand, as well.

"A shave, Ed. . . ." said a new customer and Ed snapped out of it.

ED WAS busy until after eight o'clock that Friday evening, and so he had little time to work things out in his mind. But the thought—the hard knowledge—was there. He had to do something. He had to stop Ross Langley. There was but one way, now, and it took courage. It took the sort of courage found in a whiskey bottle.

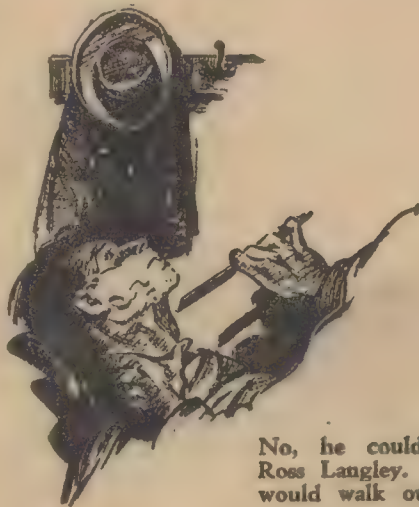
Darkening his shop, Ed went out, pulling the door shut. He crossed to the Trail Saloon, ordered and downed a stiff drink. A dozen or more townsmen were in the saloon, along with the usual gathering of cowpokes, but this evening Ed Wiley did not join any of them. Fortified by the sharp liquor, he clung to his resolve and went out onto the dark street and headed for the bank building. Ross Langley had rented an office on the second floor of the

brick building. There was, Ed saw, a light in the so-called brokerage office.

Ed climbed the stairs, drew a deep breath to brace himself and knocked. Ross Langley's voice called out, "Who's there?"

"Ed Wiley. I'd like to talk some business, Mr. Langley."

Footsteps sounded, the door swung open,



No, he could not kill Ross Langley. The man would walk out . . .

and Langley said, "Come in, friend—come in!" He was smiling and affable.

Ed Wiley stepped inside. The office was harmless enough in appearance, but to Ed it seemed like a trap.

Langley pointed to a chair, proffered a cigar, then frowned and said warily, "What's on your mind?" when his visitor refused both.

"A showdown," said Ed Wiley. "I've kept my mouth shut ever since you came to this town, but I can't stomach more of your tin-horn game. You're Duke Mowry, ex-convict, and the town is going to know it. It'll mean prison for you again, sharper—unless you play the game straight."

Langley said, flat-voiced, "I remember you now—from Yuma Prison."

So there it was. Ed said, "But I turned straight, coming out of the pen." Ed shook his head. "You're still Duke Mowry, blackleg swindler. I'm giving you a chance to keep out of prison, so make up your mind. Give up your loot and clear out of Survey alone, or go back to prison?"

Sweat stood out on Langley's forehead. He was shaken. He looked almost sick. He said, "Prison a second time would kill me. Let's bargain, friend—I have twenty thousand dollars in the Survey Bank vault. I'll cut you in—for your silence. I can't get at it tonight, but in the morning—"

"In the morning, Duke," said Ed Wiley, "you clear out of town."

He turned and left the office.

Once on the street, Ed Wiley found himself trembling. It had been an easier chore than he had anticipated—and in some ways harder. He had expected the sharper to put up a fight. He had expected Langley to jump him, or to pull a gun, in an attempt to silence him. The let-down had left him shocked.

He could see the lighted windows of Martha Rand's house, and he thought of what Langley's departure would do to her. Yet even though she were hurt, it was best so. Ross Langley would have broken her heart in another way. So Ed Wiley told himself.

Turning into the Trail, Ed ordered a drink to quiet the jumpiness he felt. He listened to the talk of the crowd, hardly hearing it, relishing a needed drink.

It was nearly midnight when he finally made his way home along dark and deserted Main Street. He pushed open his shop door, entered, closed and bolted the door. He took two steps through the darkness toward the doorway to his bedroom in the rear—and halted. Fear chilled him. Though he could see no one in the inky gloom, he sensed a presence.

His voice was jumpy as he said, "Who's there—who?"

There was no reply, but Ed was so well acquainted with the very feel of his shop that he knew there was an intruder. He moved quickly about, fumbling for a weapon—for something with which to defend himself. His hand closed on the neck of a hair tonic bottle that stood on the mirror shelf. He took a good grip on it.

A vague something moved from a rear corner of the shop. A man. Ed's eyes could not identify the intruder, yet he knew that it was Ross Langley. He had been tricked. Ross Langley had outsmarted him with his groveling, there in his office.

Ed said, "Langley, you can't get away with this!"

There was a spurt of flame, the roar of a shot—his answer. The impact of the slug was like a blow from a giant fist. Ed felt himself falling. He bumped against his barber chair, was held up by it. The hair tonic bottle was still in his hand. He had strength enough to throw it at the dark shape of Ross Langley. He heard the man grunt with surprise and pain, then a great roaring was in his ears. He finished his fall then, collapsing in a heap.

ED WILEY was unconscious when an excited gathering of townfolk finally determined the source of the shot that had shattered the midnight. They found an open window at the rear of the barber shop, left so by the intruder in his flight, and a

bolder spirit entered that way to investigate. Ed was still unconscious when they carried him to the house of Doc March.

When he did come around, he was in bed in a dimly lighted room in the doctor's house. And Doc March and Martha Rand were at the bedside.

His hazy mind leapt back, and he tried to shout. His words came in a shallow whisper, "I've got to see the sheriff—and Banker Walton!"

He raved like that, weakly, for he saw that it was full morning and that the room was dim only because the window shade was drawn. The young medico tried to calm him, and Martha Rand held his hands. He lay still and silent only when the doctor threatened to put him to sleep.

Then he tried to reason with them.

"You've got to listen," he said, pleading now. "Ross Langley shot me. I threatened to turn him over to the law for a swindler, unless he gave back the money he took from everybody—but he was too smart for me! He's a swindler, Martha—a no-good, robbing this town. I tried to stop him—I didn't want him to take you away!"

"Take me away, Ed?"

"Donnie said—"

"Why, yes—we were going away, Donnie and I. To visit Donnie's grandmother at San Francisco. Go away with Ross Langley? Oh, Ed—"

The way she said it, not only Ed, but even Doc March was surprised. Then he quietly withdrew, knowing they should be left alone.

Martha went on, "The whole town was roused last night. Nobody could imagine who would want to kill you, Ed—since everybody in Survey likes you. Then Sheriff LeBarr got his bloodhound—you see, in the fight you broke a bottle of lilac water over Langley—and the hound trailed the scent right to Langley's office. He was packing a traveling bag with money—"

Sick as he felt, Ed Wiley managed a smile. He felt that contentment that comes to a man who has paid off an honest debt. Survey had been good to him, and he had done the town a good turn. And there was Martha Rand holding his hands and smiling over him, a light of promise in her eyes—no! That couldn't be. Ed's smile faded.

"Martha, you've got to know," he said heavily. "Langley and I—well, I knew what he is because—"

Martha Rand laughed softly, happily. "Ed!" she chided him. "There's nothing I've got to know—that you can't take your time telling me." She looked away, flushing and silent—with perhaps less understanding than she should have—and perhaps more.

THE PARSON'S LAST FIGHT



The kid just stood there,
shooting. . . .

*"A Bible's good for some men, Par-
son—a six-gun's good for others.
They're curly wolves hell-bent to
prowl—an' I'm figuring to stop
them—my way!"*

By
S. OMAR BARKER

MRS. NEAL scolded Zacharia for go-
ing out on the front steps to black
his shoes, and especially for turning
his back to the street so that the patched seat
of his black alpaca pants loomed up like a
signpost for passersby to see. But the old man
said he liked the feel of hot sun on his back-

side, and if there was anybody in Las Vegas who didn't know preachers wore patched pants, it was time they were finding out.

"You could have picked out a cheaper horse at the sale yesterday," sighed Mrs. Neal, "and saved enough to buy a new pair."

"Now, Ma," he protested, "you know old Durgin can't make the long trips any more. A man can't carry on the Lord's business in this country afoot!"

Yes, she knew. The *placitas* where Zach was trying to establish missions were remote and far apart and he needed a good horse for his rounds. She also knew he wouldn't ride any other kind if the missions had been in the next block. But she was so glad to have him home on Sunday for once, that she didn't mention it.

She sometimes wished Zach instead of Roger had the job of preaching here in town. But it was Zach's own arrangement. He said Roger's health still wasn't good enough for the long hours in the saddle it took to ride the mission circuit. Anyway a younger preacher was what these town folks needed to bring them to taw.

Roger was mighty different from Zach. More than the natural difference between thirty and sixty. Old Zach was breezy and liked to talk to folks—which was a good way for a frontier preacher to be. In the pulpit Roger Kincaid was earnest and eloquent, but among people he was shy and uncommunicative, almost to the point of seeming tongue-tied. Maybe that was only natural, considering everything.

Anyway, he had been almost like a son to her and Zach, and Mrs. Neal was going to miss him like sixty when he left them soon to establish himself in a home of his own. She wondered if he had told Lessie all about himself, like a man should. She could hear him upstairs in his room now, pacing the floor as he so often did before he was due to preach. He never talked over what he was going to say in a sermon with Zach or anybody else.

"Just wrestles with the Lord," Zach once said, "till one or t'other of 'em hits on a good text."

Now Mrs. Neal heard Zach speak to someone outside, and went to the window. Two tall men with big-wheeled spurs on their knee-length boots and dust on their broad-brimmed hats had just dismounted and were turning in at the gate. Each wore a six-gun in a well-worn, low-slung leather holster.

Texans, thought Mrs. Neal, a little nervously. *What you reckon they want?*

SINCE moving to New Mexico the Neals had seen Texans in no such numbers as the wild, young trail crews who had used to arrive with their herds of longhorns during

the time Zach was fighting his uphill battle of gospel versus gunsmoke in the trail towns of Kansas. Here at Las Vegas, aside from immigrants in covered wagons, the few Texans they saw were usually either "protection men"—range detectives in search of stolen stock—or else horse peddlers—groups of venturesome cowpunchers driving a bunch of saddle broncs through the country, selling and trading what they could at each stop.

"Howdy," Zach breezily greeted the two coming in at the gate. "What is it the bartenders say? 'Step up boys, an' shine your snoots?' Far be it from me to be less hospitable. Step in, gents an' shine your boots!"

"Thanks," grinned the dark, smooth-shaven young puncher with a *barbiquejo* under his chin. "We'll wait till we come to a hawg-butcherin' an' grease 'em with lard."

But the other Texan was in no mood for banter. The weather-chapped lower lip showing below his sorrel mustache gave no symptom of a grin.

"You're Parson Neal, ain't you—that bought a Lazy L dun out of our horse herd yesterday?" he inquired.

"Yes, I bought such a horse. You wanting him back?"

"I ain't interested in the horse," replied the Texan, a little gruffly. "But you was heard to mention how this pony put you in mind of a zebra dun owned by Bat McGargin some fifteen years ago. Was you in Dodge at the time McGargin was killed?"

Thoughtfully Zach dunked the dauber and started swabbing blacking on his second shoe.

"Mister," he protested mildly, "sometimes a man likes to know the reasons back of a question before he answers it."

"That's only fair, Dirk," said the younger Texan.

"All right," shrugged the man with the chapped lips. "I'm cuttin' sign for the Lunger Kid. You knowed him?"

Zach nodded, looking a little puzzled. "Sure I knew him. Why?"

"Parson," said the Texan, and Zach could see a grim, hard look in his young eyes, "let's put it thisaway: When you owe a man something, it's your duty to hunt him up an' pay it, ain't it? What was this Lunger Kid's right name?"

"I never heard anybody in Dodge ever call him anything but what you did," said Zach, stoppering the shoe-blackening bottle. "What is it you're tryin' to get at, my friend?"

"Just this, parson—whatever become of the Lunger Kid after he murdered Lane Ellison and them others in the Buttercup Saloon?"

Zach met the stranger's steady gaze squarely, but seemed to hesitate a moment before answering.

"Murder is a hard word, my friend," he

said finally. "Some say the Kid died of his wound, some say he died of his lung fever, and I have heard others say he lived to atone for whatever evil he done."

Zach shrugged his gaunt shoulders half apologetically and looked at his watch. He stepped across the porch to the open front door.

"Ma!" he called, poking his head inside. "There's some gentlemen here to talk to me. You and Roger best go on to Sunday School without me. Like as not I'll be along in time for the preachin'."

"Land sakes, Pa!" came Mrs. Neal's reply in a tone of wifely reproof. "Why don't you invite the gentlemen in?"

"We'll go set out under the arbor," Zach called back, "where we can talk without anybody to interrupt us."

As Zach started to lead the way the two cowboys swapped questioning looks.

"We better come back some other time, Dirk," began the younger one. But already Dirk Ellison was following the old man around the corner of the house.

Zach waved his guests to home-made seats in the pleasant shade.

"Looky here, parson," began the man with the chapped lips impatiently. "All I asked you was what ever become of the Kid. You can answer that without—"

"I'll answer it my own way, my friend," broke in Zach firmly, "or not at all. Though you haven't made it plumb clear by what right you make these inquiries, I'm takin' it for granted your reasons are fair and honest. If so, there's right smart of history about the Kid that you ought to know. If you don't want to listen, just say so!"

"All right," shrugged the Texan, pulling out the makings of a smoke. "Fire away!"

OUT front Zack heard the front gate click, then the cheerful sound of Roger Kincaid's and Ma Neal's voices greeting pretty Lessie Norman as they joined her, as usual, on her way to Sunday school. He waited till the sound of their steps on the plank walk died away, then cleared his throat.

"You spoke of murder, my friend," he began. "But I want you to know how it happened. When I knew the Lunger Kid back in Dodge City around fifteen years ago, he was follering Bat McGargin around like a stray pup. Bat, as you no doubt know, was the town marshal at that time, and as tough a gun-fighter as ever pulled a pistol. He was a big man, mighty well put together, well dressed and, like Wild Bill Hickok, considered handsome. No wonder a young'un in his teens, like the Lunger Kid, should have looked upon him as a hero. But there was more to it than that. McGargin was a cold-

spoken man, never known to have befriended anybody in his life, yet he let the Lunger Kid tag around at his heels everywhere he went. By and by it come to be noticed that some of the thin rags the kid had worn when he first showed up in Dodge was replaced from time to time by cast-off articles of Bat McGargin's own expensive clothing.

"Bat's old black broadcloth coat reached purt' near to the Kid's knees and hung as loose on his scrawny, holler-chested body as a beanbag on a broom handle. But it served to keep him warm in that raw Kansas weather—which was more than his own rags had done.

"Being a minister of the Gospel in a wild trail town was kinder of an uphill business. All the church I had to preach in was a tent, and lots of times all the congregation I had to preach to was a few cowboys that happened to stumble in so drunk that they didn't know where they was at. So I just made it my business mainly to make what friends I could, drunk or sober, righteous or sinful, alive or dead—without preachin' at 'em. Thataway I figgered I might win a few friends, too, for the Lord.

"Between me and Bat McGargin there was neither friendship nor enmity. 'Bat,' I told him, 'you and me both aim at promoting peaceable behavior in this town. Why can't we sorter work together? In a way we're both shootin' at the same rabbit, ain't we?'"

"'Parson,' he replied, that cold short-spoken way of his. 'Maybe you could keep a rabbit in line by throwin' a Bible at him, but these Texas trail crews ain't rabbits. They're curly wolves hell-bent to howl, an' the only peacemaker they savvy is a smokin' six-shooter. I don't mean no disrespect to religion, but you an' me don't braid together no better than ribbons an' rawhide!'"

"In a way I reckon he was right, but I sure hated to see men livin' and dyin' by bullets and bloodshed instead of brotherhood and the Bible. A heap of those young Texans that come up the trail with the cattle and wound up in boothill was more wild than bad. But Bat McGargin was hired to maintain order, and if it took shootin' to do it, his powder was generally dry.

"I hated to see a young lad like the Lunger Kid making such an idol out of a gunman like Bat. But you might as well have tried to suck cockleburrs off a steer's tail as wean the Kid away from Bat.

"The Kid was from Kentucky. He claimed that his folks had shipped him out west in hopes that the new air would cure him of his lung fever, and that they sent him money every month—all he needed—and that he didn't want no charity nor help nor sympathy from anybody. But the truth was that he

didn't even have any folks, and if Bat McGargin hadn't picked him up out of the railroad yards the night he lit in Dodge City—on the toe of a brakeman's boot—he would have had the doubtful honor of being about the only he-human ever buried in Dodge up to that time without a bullet hole in him. It was a wonder he lived, even as it was, for according to old Doc Draper he already had one lung half gone and the other one goin'.

"Bat lived in considerable style at the hotel, but the Kid lodged in a shack out in the back yard. How come this shack to have a good warm bed in it nobody ever knew, any more than they knew how it happened that the Kid got paid enough for various little swampin' out jobs to buy his grub, when the plain fact was that the little work he was able to do wasn't worth a cent of any man's money. If you had asked him, Bat McGargin would have denied having anything to do with it.

"Of course, me being a preacher, it was my idea that the Lunger Kid would be a heap better off, both in body and soul, living in a decent, God-fearin' home than he was holed up in that shack and trotting around at the heels of a gun-fighter like Bat McGargin. My wife and I didn't have any young'uns of our own, and all the home we had was a three-room shack, but I went to the Lunger Kid and offered him to come share it. He just looked at me and shook his head, then hurried on down the street to catch up with Bat McGargin, just entering the Buttercup Saloon. The only thing the Kid would let me do for him was to loan him books to read. But the only time he ever had to read them was when Bat McGargin was in his room at the hotel, or riding out some place a-horseback. The rest of the time he dogged Bat's heels, always a few steps behind him, as worshipful as a pet pup. A heap of the time Bat never even seemed to notice him. In the saloons, the Lunger Kid was the butt of some purty rough jokes, but he never talked back or showed fight.

"WELL, to make it a short horse and soon curried, there got to be some bad feeling between Bat McGargin and a Texas trail man named Frank Cowley. Some said it was over a woman. Anyhow Frank Cowley came to Bat McGargin's room one night and there were shots fired and Cowley was killed.

"Most everybody considered the shooting justified, but Cowley was a Texan and some of his trail crew friends took it up. Six or eight of them with guns at their hips, started a round of the saloons and dance halls, looking for Bat McGargin. They didn't have to look far. As quick as Bat heard that Cowley's Texas friends were looking for him, he set out to oblige them by being easy to find.

"Fresh off the trail, the Texans took time out to line up at the Buttercup Saloon for a drink. The bartender was setting out their glasses when Bat McGargin walked in. There was a sudden silence as he strolled to a table halfway across the room and stood beside it.

"Finish your drinks, gents," he told them quietly. "Then if you're looking for Bat McGargin, you'll find me outside."

"It had always been a point in Bat's favor that he never started a gunfight inside a crowded saloon where bystanders were liable to get hit if he could help it, and it was plain that he didn't aim to now. The leader of the Texans was a young cowpuncher named Lane Ellison.

"All right, McGargin," he said, "we'll be out in a minute—an' you better be ready to defend yourself."

"Thanks, boys," said Bat. As they raised their glasses, he turned and started out. According to the gun-toters' code of those days, such a move should have been safe. But it wasn't. Suddenly, without warning, one of the trail men at the bar turned and cut Bat down with three shots into his back.

"To this day, I reckon, nobody knows for sure which one of them done it. Some claim it was Frank Cowley's cousin Tom, others that it was Lane Ellison. Anyhow it was Lane Ellison that stood then, with his back to the bar, six-gun in hand, and spoke his piece to the dozen or more men, some of them friends of McGargin in the saloon.

"Don't nobody make a move!" he warned them, then give a jerk of his head to his companions. "The job's done, boys—let's go!"

"But the job wasn't as near done as he thought. Neither Ellison nor any of his crew had paid any attention to the harmless looking, round-shouldered, sickly-faced boy who had followed Bat in and stood leaning against the wall beside the door in a fit of coughing.

"Nor did they take any notice of him now when he abruptly choked off his spasm of coughing to stare in horror at the body of Bat McGargin bleeding all over the floor. For a single terrible instant the Lunger Kid gazed upon the body of his friend. Then, with a pup-like whimper he yanked a six-shooter from somewheres under that big old loose coat Bat McGargin had given him, and began to shoot.

"Lane Ellison was the first man down, and three more of the Texans were on the floor before the Lunger Kid dropped his empty, smoking six-gun and pulled another loaded one from under his old black coat. Of course the Texans done some shooting, too, but the surprise of it had throwed them plumb off balance, and the only hit they made was a single bullet through the Lunger Kid's leg.

"The whole thing didn't last over a minute, but when it was done and over three trail

men were dead, two more down with their wounds, and there was blood leaking onto the saddle of the sixth as he somehow got out of there, onto his horse and away out of town.

"Except for the bartender down behind the bar, the place had emptied mighty quick. When Doc Draper and me got there, the Lung-er Kid was down on the floor beside Bat McGargin, with the dead man's head in his lap, crying soft and snuffy, like a woman.

"We got the dead buried and the wounded tended to the best we could. Then a coroner's jury was formed. I still recollect its verdict: 'In regards to the Buttercup Saloon mix-up of this date, resulting in four dead, two dyin' and several hurt, this jury finds accordin' to the evidence that same was just another mis-alaneous shootin' an' nobody to blame.'

"But friends of the men whom the Kid had shot down to avenge the killing of his one and only friend, didn't all feel that way about it. For a week armed Texans stalked the streets of Dodge—but they never found him.

"It was shortly afterwards that my wife and I moved on out here to New Mexico, and I have never gone back. But I understand that to this day it is still a mystery in Dodge City whatever become of the Lung-er Kid."

A OLD ZACH NEAL brought his story to its inconclusive end, the Texas horse-trader with chapped lips stood up.

"But it ain't no mystery to you, is it, parson?" he remarked dryly. "I reckon I might as well tell you: Lane Ellison was my uncle. Ever since I was a button I've nursed a notion to avenge his killin'—if I ever found the Lung-er Kid alive. I'd heard it was some jack-

leg preacher that hid him from the Texans back in Dodge—so I didn't hardly expect you to come clean with me. Well, so long, parson. Maybe we'll be seein' you—in church."

As soon as the two Texans had gone out to their horses Zach went quickly through the house and out the back way, grabbing his hat, coat and long unused six-shooter on the way. By hurrying down the alley and across a vacant lot he reached the entrance to the unpainted frame church house just ahead of the two Texans riding down the street. The six-gun under his shirt, its bulge hidden by his coat, lay heavy and cold against his ribs. But no heavier than the load of anxiety in his heart lest he might have to use the weapon against a fellow man, in order to protect the life of another who had grown most dear to him.

Just what Dirk Ellison knew or surmised or intended to do, he had not been able to guess. Now, as the Texans came opposite him he thought he saw Ellison's left wrist start the motion of reining his horse to a stop before the church door. With a silent prayer, Zach tightened the fingers of his right hand over the butt of the .45 inside his shirt.

But instead of stopping, the two Texans raised their right hands briefly in a casual farewell salute and jogged on down the street.

For a moment old Zach stood watching them go, a grateful certainty growing in his heart that they did not mean to return. Then he turned and went into the gaunt-windowed church from whose unadorned pulpit the quiet, sincere voice of Roger Kincaid, alias the Lung-er Kid, was just beginning to read the text of his morning sermon.

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Kirkwood kept
moving in, still fir-
ing. . . .

*"You figure on living to a ripe old
age, stranger, here's a little advice.
Git outa town before morning!"*



DEATH RIDES THESE GUNS

By **DAVID CREWE**

LANE KIRKWOOD rode into Nine Pines about noon that day. Outwardly there was nothing to set the town apart from any other—a few roads at each end merged into one long, dusty thoroughfare, flanked on either side by weather-beaten, false-fronted buildings. Yet the looks a few people cast in his direction informed Lane that all was not as serene here as outward appearances would indicate.

He returned the glances with casual insolence and, a little farther down the street, passed the solid brick building with the sign, JAIL, painted on the bricks. His manner seemed to change. He ignored the stares of the townspeople and glued his eyes on the calaboose, seeming to take in every detail of the structure. Even after he'd passed it, he twisted in the saddle for a final, lingering look. He was grinning faintly as he pulled up at the livery stable.

The liveryman came out and squinted at him, waiting for him to dismount. A surge of satisfaction went through Lane. The liveryman was an old-timer, whose jaws worked ferociously on a cud of tobacco, and whose bright eyes darted everywhere. Lane reckoned the old man had probably not missed much in the past forty years.

He said, out of nothing, now, "Never had a jail break since we built 'er."

"Don't doubt it," Lane said affably. "That where they've been keeping this Eddy McIntosh?"

For a moment, the hostler's jaws stopped working, and his skinny Adams' apple bobbed comically.

"What do ya know about Eddy McIntosh?" he wanted to know.

Lane Kirkwood shrugged and dragged an old newspaper from his hip pocket. "Just what I read in the papers," he answered. "That they've got a gent in jail named McIntosh, and they're taking him to the state capital, where they expect him to turn state's evidence against his former pardners." His lips twisted mockingly. "A fine, back-stabbing skunk he must be!"

"Like hell," the hostler flared. "Eddy's a-doing this town a favor—and a big one—they ain't a finer boy alive than Eddy. And who might you be, anyhow?"

"I might be almost anybody—but I ain't. The name's Lane Kirkwood an' if this McIntosh is getting ready to tell on his former pardners, that makes him a skunk in my book."

The stableman's face turned red with anger. "Might be you know some of Eddy's pardners. Might be you're one of them's says that Eddy won't live to reach the state capital." He broke off suddenly, his eyes dropping to note the low sling of the stranger's twin Colts, the way their grips jutted forward, and the way his hands were always near them. He looked up again into the cool gray eyes and noted the sardonic amusement therein, and the firm line of the jaw below.

"Yeah?" Lane prompted. "As you were saying?"

"Wasn't saying nothing important," the stableman grunted, and started to lead Kirkwood's horse inside.

LANE KIRKWOOD seemed in no particular hurry. He leaned against the door of the stable and dragged out his makings. His eyes were on the jail as he fashioned a smoke and lit it. He noticed that one or two townspeople were lounging around in store fronts, keeping an eye on him with more than idle curiosity.

He took his time finishing his smoke, then ground it out with elaborate casualness, before he started strolling up the street. He noticed with smiling satisfaction, that no sooner had he left the vicinity of the livery stable, than one of the men who'd been watching him made a beeline for the livery stable.

The grin widened on his face. That was good. That liveryman would talk his head off—and stretch things a mile. It wouldn't take long for the news to spread through town.

He took a good look at the man who had hurried toward the livery stable. Cattleman, he judged him to be, but not a very prosperous cattleman, judging by the worn and patched clothes he wore.

Opposite the jail once more, Lane Kirkwood stopped and leaned idly against a lamp post. He stared across at the squat little brick building. To one side was a small harness shop, to the other a two-story hotel. Some of the hotel rooms overlooked the small iron-grilled windows of the jail building.

Suddenly he roused himself and walked briskly across the street to the hotel. A bored hotel clerk flipped the hotel register open and indicated pen and ink. Kirkwood signed his name boldly.

"I want a room on the second floor—that side," Kirkwood said, indicating the side of the hotel next to the jail building. The clerk shrugged and tossed a key on the counter.

"Two-eleven," he grunted, and returned to his dozing.

Kirkwood took the steps two at a time, and hurried down the corridor on the second floor till he found two-eleven. He flipped the lock open and walked in. Then he chuckled. Two-eleven was a corner room. He had a window looking down on the street—and the side window overlooked the jail.

He stared for a long time out of this second window. He could see a young fellow dressed in range clothes seated on the edge of a bunk in one of the cells. He transferred his gaze to the other window, and saw the ragged cattleman cross the street and disappear into the hotel lobby below him. He gave the cattleman a few minutes, then went back downstairs again.

The hotel clerk looked bored no longer. Lane noticed the look of interest and suspicion the clerk gave him as he came down the steps, and he wasn't surprised when the clerk called to him as he started through the

lobby. The cattleman was nowhere in sight.

"Uh—that room—two-eleven," the clerk said nervously. "I—uh—forgot. That room was reserved early this morning." He attempted to smile, but the suspicion in his eyes made the smile a weak thing. "Fraid I'll have to move you."

Kirkwood stared back at the clerk, wooden-faced.

"I like the room I'm in," he said in a flat voice. "Reckon I'll stay."

"But we got nice rooms—on the other side—"

"You trying to argue with me?" Kirkwood asked softly.

The clerk breathed deeply. "Lord, mister," he said, "if you like the room—well—" His voice trailed off uncertainly and Kirkwood walked out.

There was no idling in his manner now. With purposeful stride he headed back toward the livery stable. As he drew near, he noticed a couple of men walk out the other end of the stable—and a flat grin creased his face. Evidently Eddy McIntosh had a few friends in town, but Kirkwood wondered idly just how far they would go—if and when things came to a showdown.

He stepped into the stable. "Where's my outfit?"

The liveryman popped out of the cluttered office. "Right there on that peg," he grunted, and watched Kirkwood with thinly disguised hostility. Kirkwood was oblivious to that, however, as he untied his bed roll from the saddle. Then he slid a high-powered rifle from his saddle boot and tucked it under his arm.

"That rifle'll be safe here, if you wanta leave it," the liveryman said quickly.

"It'll be just as safe," Kirkwood drawled, "up in my hotel room."

By now, Nine Pines was completely aware that something unusual was going on, and Kirkwood felt the gaze of many people on him as he walked back toward the hotel. The hotel clerk watched him in sullen silence as he crossed the lobby and disappeared up the steps.

Up in the room, he tossed the high-powered rifle on the bed with a grin. Its caliber was unusual in this part of the country, and he hadn't been able to get any ammunition for it for quite some time. He dropped his bedroll in a corner and rolled a smoke, all the while watching the street below. It was hardly any time before he saw what he'd been watching for.

The same down-at-the-heels cowman who had entered the hotel lobby, was now hotfooting it toward the jail building. The distance wasn't too far, and Lane got a good look at him. The man had a blocky, toil-worn face, right now creased in a worried frown.

He disappeared into the jail.

A few minutes wait, and there was activity in the little cell block. A tall man with a star on his vest opened the cell door and motioned to the fellow sitting on the bunk. That, Kirkwood surmised, was Eddy McIntosh. The sheriff talked shortly to Eddy, and they both glanced in the direction of the hotel—toward the window of Kirkwood's room. Then they both left the cell. Kirkwood sprawled across the bed, and began to wait for a visitor.

AT HIS, "Come in," the door opened and the sheriff entered. Kirkwood's eyes rested on the craggy features of the lawman unflinchingly.

"Stranger in town, ain'tcha, Kirkwood?" the sheriff asked easily.

"First time in Nine Pines," Lane murmured.

"Nice-looking rifle." Idly the sheriff picked up the gun and levered the breech open, noting its emptiness. "I usually check up on strangers' business in town," he said mildly. "Especially when they're packing plenty of hardware."

"My business is easy checked," Kirkwood chuckled. "I've rode a long way—and I got a long way to ride. Figured to stop a couple of days and soak up some loafing."

"For a man just passing through, you seem to know a lot about Nine Pines business—meaning Eddy McIntosh." The lawman's voice was taking on a hard edge.

"I just read the newspapers and listen to gossip."

"And the gossip around here is?"

"That there's gents who don't want to see McIntosh get to the capital and do any talking," Kirkwood replied freely. He rolled a smoke while the silence built up in the room. "Then, of course, there's gossip that Eddy's got friends who'd see that didn't happen. But of course," he added thoughtfully, "there's often times when a man's friends fail him—in a pinch."

That shot got past the old lawman's guard. For a fleeting instant Kirkwood saw the haggard worry in the man's eyes; saw the raw weariness that told of the long vigils. . . .

Yes, Kirkwood thought, a lot of Eddy's friends were falling down, now that the going was getting rough. The sheriff stood the rifle in a corner, and when he turned around, his blue eyes were once more cool and determined.

"Kirkwood, don't let anything interfere with your loafing in Nine Pines—I'm warning you. Don't try it." He nodded curtly and left.

Lane Kirkwood finished his smoke leisurely, then went out on the street again. He looked over the three saloons that quenched Nine Pines' thirst, then decided on the Chuck-a-Luck, the gaudiest one of the three. He was

conscious of being watched as he strolled up the street toward the Chuck-a-Luck. Idly he noted that the three or four horses in front of the saloon all carried the Star-in-a-Circle brand. One horse, a big bay, carried a silver-mounted saddle. Kirkwood entered.

"Beer," he told the bartender, and let his eyes roam over the saloon. There were only a few patrons at this time of day. Three or four men dressed in cowboy clothes were shooting pool in the back. Men who are paid to punch cattle, Kirkwood thought, don't play pool in the middle of the day, and since the horses out front must be theirs, he found himself wondering idly about this Star-in-a-Circle spread that paid men to loaf. Then he noticed, out in the street, the cattleman who had gone to see the hotel clerk, and later had gone in the jail.

He motioned to the barkeep.

"Who's that gent outside?" he asked. "I don't know him, but he seems to take an awful interest in everything I do."

The bartender grinned slyly. "That's Rob Bond," he said. "Owns a two-bit spread north of town—"

"—and also has a daughter that a fellow named Eddy McIntosh had planned to marry," a cool voice cut in behind Kirkwood. He turned. The man who had spoken was dressed in fancy range garb; fancy stitched boots with tan whipcord pants tucked in the top of them; gaudy calfskin vest with a heavy nugget chain dangling from the pockets, and a cream colored Stetson tilted jauntily on the back of his head. He was handsome in a smooth, polished way, even though age and dissipation were bringing a flabbiness to his chin and jowls.

"Seems like that's all I've heard since I've hit town," Kirkwood said, sipping his beer. "Eddy McIntosh this, Eddy McIntosh that. Must be quite some hombre."

The other shrugged. "Not so much. Just the star witness in an investigation they're having at the capital. I didn't get your name."

"People usually don't till I give it to 'em," Kirkwood answered. "It's Kirkwood. Lane Kirkwood."

"Mine's Ace Carmody. Own the Star-in-a-Circle ranch, about six miles northwest of town." He spoke to the bartender. "Joe, a bottle of that special—and leave us alone for a minute."

The bartender set a bottle and two glasses on the counter and retreated to the other end of the bar. Carmody poured two slugs and they downed them neat.

"I told Matt there was no use getting anybody," Carmody said softly. "But since you're already here," he shrugged, "you might as well know that somebody got on to the deal."

The slug of whiskey in Kirkwood's stomach should have warmed it up, but instead, there

was a cool feeling in the pit of his stomach, and a tightening of the muscles.

"Damn!" Kirkwood said just as softly. "I was afraid of that. Still, such complications can be overcome."

"Sure, sure," Carmody agreed. "Just wanted to tell you that Eddy's cell has been moved. He's on the other side now—away from the hotel."

"That might make it tough," Kirkwood agreed solemnly.

"Oh? Well, you'd know your business," Carmody laughed and filled the glasses again. "Matt might be tight about some things—but he also knows when he's got to lay it on the line and hire the best! Here's how."

They downed the second shot, and a few minutes later Kirkwood left. The afternoon was wearing on, now, and the town was beginning to fill up with people.

KIRKWOOD strolled around for the better part of an hour, until he felt that he was not being watched so closely, then slipped unobtrusively into an alley. He hurried down the alley and made his way around the town, working his way toward the little brick jail house from the opposite side. After a few minutes' maneuvering, he was standing about fifty yards from the jail, in the shade of an abandoned stable. He was on the opposite side of the jail from the hotel.

"Don't move, Kirkwood." There was a squeak of worn boots behind him—then something hard bored into the small of his back. He felt his guns being lifted from their holsters and turned slowly.

It was the down-at-the-heels cattleman, Rob Bond. The man's face was flushed with excitement, but the hand that held his gun was steady enough. Another man, equally as ragged, stepped from around the corner.

"Let's take him straight to the sheriff, Rob," the newcomer said. He was older than Bond by a good ten years, and his body was bent from the hard struggle he'd had in life.

"What for?" Kirkwood snapped. "For standing here enjoying the view?"

"Shut up," Bond growled. "We know what you're in town for—and we know who hired you. But you ain't gonna earn that money they paid you. Eddy's got the goods on them two and he's getting to the capital all in one piece."

"And it's you two that's gonna stop me, huh?" Kirkwood growled.

"Us two—and more—if there's need for more," Rob Bond said. "Eddy's got friends."

"I don't believe it," Kirkwood stated flatly. "Eddy *had* friends, but not the kind to see him through a tight. That's why there's just the two of you in town." He laughed.

Rob Bond's face turned scarlet, and Lane

knew his barb had sunk home. Then the man's shoulders squared.

"Maybe there *are* just two of us—that's enough."

Kirkwood laughed again. "It would take about half a dozen more like you—"

Then he struck. Rob Bond staggered sideways from a stinging blow to the head. He stumbled into his companion, as Kirkwood moved with the speed of an uncoiling spring. He snatched for Bond's gun, was twisting it free while he put Bond between himself and the other man. Bond's companion was dancing back, trying to get in a shot, but before he could maneuver enough, Kirkwood had Bond's gun, and the struggling rancher still shielded him.

"Drop it," he ordered the other man. He picked up his own weapons, and flung the two ranchers' guns far into the weeds. His grin was sarcastic as the guns fell out of sight.

"It'll take more'n a couple of broken-down old men to do Eddy McIntosh any good," he said with studied insolence, and watched their faces flush with frustration and anger. He chuckled as he turned on his heel and left them standing there.

He walked boldly up the main street and into the hotel. From his two windows he kept vigil over the movements of the cattlemen. They appeared in sight a short time later, and he noticed they had retrieved their guns. They stopped at the livery stable and held a long, earnest conversation with the liveryman. Finally, by the emphatic nodding of heads, Kirkwood surmised that they had reached an agreement on something.

Immediately after that, all three left town in different directions, and none of the three were sparing their horses as they rode out.

Kirkwood thoughtfully rolled a smoke and stared into the town spread out around him. Little things he noticed and put into his mind, like pieces to a jigsaw puzzle.

Shortly after the three had ridden out of town, a lounge in front of one of the stores bestirred himself and hurried into the Chuck-a-Luck saloon. And shortly thereafter, a Star-in-a-Circle rider left the Chuck-a-Luck and rode out of town.

The sheriff of Nine Pines was watching these proceedings, and Kirkwood could see him make the rounds inside the little jail, shutting all doors, although the night was warm, and making sure that all windows were fastened.

However, as yet the town seemed strangely quiet and peaceful.

As dusk began to settle, there were footsteps in the hall outside, then a light, quick rap on the door.

"Come in," Kirkwood said, then shifted his position as the door opened.

THIS man who entered was tall and thin, almost cadaverous. His store-bought suit was conservatively cut and somber in color. His face looked as if it had long ago forgotten how to smile.

"You're Matt Plunkett?" Kirkwood stated rather than asked.

The man's thin eyebrows quirked a moment, and a frown creased his somber face. "I don't ever remember meeting you," he said sourly.

Kirkwood chuckled. "Saw your name painted in gold on the bank window," he explained to his visitor.

Plunkett's balding head bobbed once. "Since you know me, then, I want to tell you that I don't want this visit mentioned—to anyone!"

Kirkwood's face twisted in a mocking look of sorrow. "And I was wanting to brag about how the town banker called on me!"

"This is no time for joking!" the banker said sourly. "Seems to me that Ace has bungled the job enough already."

Kirkwood's face was grave and his hand was steady as he rolled a smoke. That afternoon, when he'd talked to Ace Carmody, he hadn't known all the answers. Now he knew them. It was like a poker hand, he thought, with him knowing what each man was holding. And the banker's calling on him, was just like being dealt another ace. And now he'd bet a blue chip.

"Reckon Ace knows what he's doing," he said coldly. "And I guaranteed the job."

"Ace doesn't know what he's doing," the banker said crossly. "Why did he have to bring you in? What's the matter with the man he hired last week?"

That jarred Kirkwood, but he kept his face set. "Guess Ace has his own plans," he snapped back.

"Whatever they are, he's sure as hell made a mess of things!" the banker growled. "Those damn ranchers are getting stirred up—and I told Ace that was the one thing we couldn't afford to have happen!"

"You're just imagining things," Kirkwood smiled.

"Imagining hell!" Plunkett yelled, his voice rising shrilly. "The way you blundered in here today upset the whole damn works, and got Rob Bond all stirred up. The talk about Eddy not getting to the capital had about died down—till *you* hit town! Now Bond and some of his ragtail bunch are out rounding up help."

"You're yelling before you're hurt," Kirkwood argued.

"You wait," Plunkett warned sourly. "There'll be hell to pay if Ace tries to start anything now. And you can tell Ace that he needn't count on me when the fireworks start. I washed my hands of the whole affair when

he told me he wouldn't handle it my way."

Kirkwood wondered idly what Plunkett's way had been, but he didn't consider it important. The main thing was that the ranchers had started getting together.

"How can you be sure the ranchers are stirred up?" he asked.

"I have my own ways of finding out things," Plunkett said. "And I've never been wrong yet. Fooling with McIntosh now, would be like kicking a stick of dynamite around. Good night."

The banker stomped out, and Kirkwood resumed his window watching, paying particular attention to the movements of Matt Plunkett as he came out of the hotel. The banker seemed undecided where to go, and Kirkwood had a few uneasy moments when he seemed to be heading for the Chuck-a-Luck. However, Plunkett didn't enter the saloon, but kept on up the street, and was lost in the gathering darkness.

When full darkness had descended on Nine Pines, Kirkwood stirred from his chair and got his hat. There were a few men in the hotel lobby, but no loud and boisterous conversation, as he passed through and stepped outside.

He had not gone ten feet before he realized that he was being followed. He slowed down, and his pursuers did the same. He grinned and headed for one of the saloons.

For the next two hours, Kirkwood ambled around Nine Pines and visited each saloon. He drank beers, but no whiskey.

In each saloon, the story was the same—grim-faced cattlemen eyed his entrance in stony silence, and conversation died in each place as he entered. The talk would be gradually resumed, but the close watch on him was never relaxed.

Occasionally he ran across one or two Star-in-a-Circle riders, but in every saloon, they were outnumbered almost three to one by the stony-faced ranchers.

The Chuck-a-Luck was the last place he visited that night. Star-in-a-Circle riders were there in great numbers, but even so, the ranchers had the edge.

Kirkwood was sipping his beer, when Ace Carmody came over. The rancher's handsome face was flushed and ugly with anger.

"That damn Plunkett," he snarled, "has gummed the works up for fair."

"If you don't like it—" Kirkwood started in a cold voice, but Carmody waved him to silence.

"It's not your doing," he ground out, "and I got no argument with you. It's just that Matt is too blasted nervous about jobs like this, and when he mixes in 'em—he queers the whole deal." He indicated the crowd in the saloon with a jerk of his head. "Look at

'em—a whole dam' army, just waiting for us to start something."

Kirkwood shrugged elaborately. "I've seen things start before," he said casually, "and lived to see 'em end."

"Yeah, I know," Carmody grunted. "I ain't worried—only I wish Matt would keep his nose outta things like this." But his tone indicated that he was worried, and plenty. "We'll go through with the plan," he added. "In the morning when the sheriff and McIntosh get on the stage at nine o'clock. But I guess Matt told you all about it."

Kirkwood bit his lip to hold back a question, and decided that he should be content with that. He merely nodded and finished his beer.

"Yeah—reckon I'll turn in for the night."

Carmody glanced over his shoulder nervously. "Good idea. You oughta stay out of sight as much as you can."

On the way back to the hotel, Kirkwood could feel the tension that held Nine Pines in its grip that night. Passing the jail—on the other side of the street—he could make out dim, shadowy figures surrounding the little brick structure. His lips quirked in a smile. It began to look now like some of Eddy McIntosh's friends had stood up for him—even in a fight.

HE ALLOWED himself the luxury of sleeping late the next morning, and it was a few minutes after eight before he awoke. That, he thought, was good, as he didn't expect to get any breakfast before the stage left.

He dressed leisurely, then checked his guns carefully before he buckled them on. The stage depot was almost across the street from the jail, and already there was a grim crowd around the depot.

More than one man cast glances at his hotel window.

The muscles in his stomach began to tighten as he descended the stairs into the lobby. There was a reception committee waiting for him—four ranchers, spread out across the lobby. The clerk was behind his desk, ready to duck.

"You ain't going nowhere, Kirkwood," one of the ranchers said harshly.

Kirkwood didn't speak; just drew. His hands were at his side one instant; there was a blur of movement, and his guns were in his fists. The ranchers had seen his hands start, and had made clumsy grabs for their own guns, but no gun had cleared leather.

"Cheek your guns with the hotel clerk," Kirkwood said stonily. The four hesitated a moment, then shuffled toward the desk. There was muttered profanity as they passed their guns over the counter. The white-faced clerk

collected them and hurriedly shoved them in the safe behind the counter.

"Upstairs," he snapped, and his gun muzzles herded the four up the steps. Then he turned and walked quickly into the street. As he neared the stage depot, he heard the mutter that went up from the crowd, and felt its ugly mood. He slowed to a halt and leaned his back against a store building, still fifty feet or so from the depot.

There was a worried frown on his face and he wished now that he'd asked Ace Carmody about the plan at the stage depot. He felt the hard eyes of the crowd on him and, looking beyond the ranchers, he could see the Star-in-a-Circle riders gathering outside the Chuck-a-Luck saloon, a little farther along down the street.

Suddenly a single shot roared through the uneasy silence of Nine Pines. The crowd tensed and strained, waiting for more shooting, but there was none. Men were craning to look in the direction of the shot, down toward the livery stable.

Then a strange procession started up the street. Two men rounded the corner of the livery stable, dragging a third man between them.

"It's Rob Bond and Jake Durand!" someone yelled.

"Who's the gent they're dragging? Looks like he's been shot. . . ."

As the three drew nearer, the blood showed clearly on the man in the middle. The little calvacade went right past the Star-in-a-Circle riders and continued moving toward the stage depot.

"Caught this dirty son up on the roof of the livery!" Rob Bond yelled. "Had a rifle lined on the jail door."

Kirkwood saw Ace Carmody come out of the Chuck-a-Luck and start up the street toward the depot. The rancher's face was an expressionless mask.

"Tried to shoot it out," Rob Bond continued, "when we snuck up on him. I winged him."

"One of the bushwhacking killers Ace Carmody and Matt Plunkett hired to kill Eddy!" someone shouted harshly. "I say let's string 'im up."

"Let's string 'em both up while we're at it!" another voice cut in, and the crowd wheeled to face Lane Kirkwood. But Kirkwood wasn't watching the crowd particularly. His eyes were on the wounded man that Rob Bond and Jake Durand had.

He took a few steps closer.

"Hello, Tooley," Kirkwood spoke to the wounded man. The bushwhacker's eyes widened in surprise, and his lips peeled back in a snarl.

"Kerns!" he jerked.

"They're old friends," someone howled. "Git some rope!"

Ace Carmody had reached the crowd and was shoving his way through. The crowd opened to let him in, then closed once more around him.

"While we're at it—let's string up the man that hired these two skunks!" someone yelled.

Carmody's face paled, but he stood his ground. "Kirkwood! Start your play—"

The wounded man laughed, a high, shrill cackling sound. "Carmody—you're a fool! This man's a United States Marshal!"

For one short moment, there was dead silence. Ace Carmody's face was a picture of surprise and anger. Then his lips twisted and he flung himself sideways, his hand stabbing for his gun.

Kirkwood felt the swish of lead past his cheek, then his own gun was bucking in his palm. He watched his slugs slam Carmody backwards, then down. And as the owner of the Star-in-a-Circle went down, Kirkwood started walking, his smoking guns still jutting forward, toward the Star-in-a-Circle riders. But it wasn't necessary. Against Kirkwood's deadly guns—and the ranchers', the riders melted away, then broke and ran for their mounts.

Kirkwood turned to the sheriff of Nine Pines, who had hurried across the street.

"If I ain't mistaken, that's Matt Plunkett getting on a horse down the street. I'd send somebody after him—was I you."

NINE PINES was bustling with activity. There was to be a wedding tonight. Eddy McIntosh and Sara Bond were getting hitched. Lane Kirkwood—or Kerns—was still in town, having been argued into staying for the wedding by the townspeople. In the Drover's Saloon, he sipped his beer and took a drag of smoke.

"Eddy joined the gang a-purpose to find out who was running things," he told the sheriff of Nine Pines. "But he never could get any real evidence against Carmody or Plunkett." He grinned at the sheriff. "You caught Eddy before his job was done—so Eddy let it out that he did have plenty of evidence, and Carmody and Plunkett fell for it."

"You shoulda let us know who you were," the sheriff told him. "You dang near got shot."

The other shook his head. "It was the only way. By riding in and stirring up the ranchers—well, Carmody had to pull something desperate."

The sheriff laughed. "Eddy's getting ready to pull something desperate right now. Let's go over and watch."

Answers To CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 89)



1. The term, "couldn't drive nails in a snowball," is used in reference to a driver of horses or mules—indicating the individual in question is an extremely poor driver.

2. Your friend seeking an Arkansas toothpick would be in search of a large sheath knife.

3. According to Western standards, there is no difference between a brand blotter and a brand blotcher.

4. True. A calico pony is a piebald or spotted pony.

5. A yack is a foolish or stupid individual.

6. Your badman friend would be indicating that he had a touch of the ague.

7. True. The cowpuncher term, dice house, is often used as a slang expression for bunkhouse. Rather obviously, the phrase had its origin in a primary activity in many of the bunkhouses of the West.

8. True. In the language of the Westerner, a draw is a small canyon or dry stream bed. The term, in rangeland, has another meaning, of course, when used in connection with the shooting iron! Thus, a man draws his iron.

9. According to the Westerner's way of thinking, a hard-tail is a mule, whereas a hard-case is a tough hombre or an all-around badman. The expression, hard-tail, came into use through the mule's ability to take a good deal of punishment from the mule-skinner's whip.

10. A hot roll is a roll of camp bedding or a roll of blankets.

11. In general, a line camp is a permanent

camp for the use of line riders or fence riders. Such a camp provides subsistence for cowpunchers engaged in the above duties.

12. True. The term, mangana, refers to the act of roping an animal by the front feet and thus throwing him to the ground.

13. True. In Texas, "rustler" is often applied to an energetic person who is willing to work.

14. In the language of the Westerner, "punch" means simply to work as a cowboy, or handle livestock for a living. In this connection, incidentally, one seldom in the West hears the term, cowboy. "Cowpuncher" is the variant which is popular with those people who live and earn their livelihood on the ranches and ranges.

15. Pine straw is simply dried pine needles.

16. In a stackyard you would be apt to find horses. A stackyard is a horseyard, generally found somewhere near the ranch house.

17. A cowpuncher thumbs a horse by running his thumb along the side of a horse's neck. Thumbing is done in order to make the horse pitch and buck.

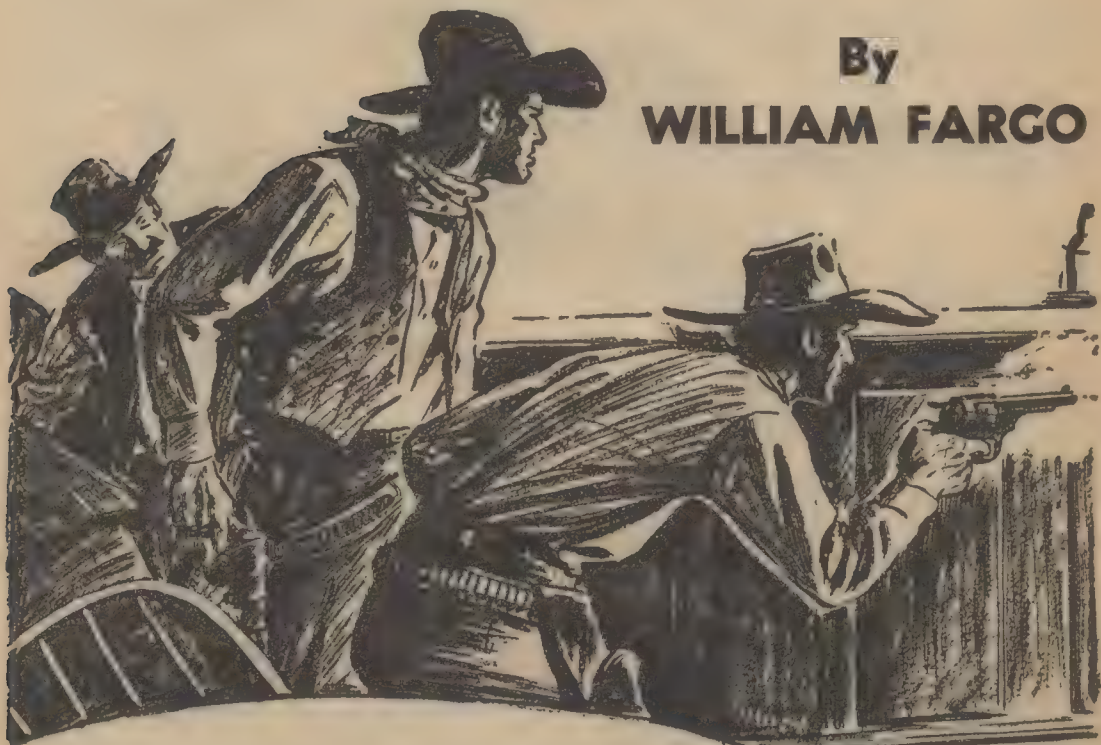
18. The tall grass country identifies the Western prairies. This land, of course, is not the same as the sagebrush country.

19. The term, "works", refers to the spring and fall roundups.

20. The word, *remuda*, which refers to a string of saddle horses generally kept ready for daily use, is usually pronounced *remooter* in the West.

POWDERSMOKE PARDNERS

By
WILLIAM FARGO



CHAPTER ONE

Satan Needs Another Son

WHEN he sauntered into the Million Dollar Bar on Railroad Avenue in Longhorn City, Bart O'Shea was looking for a buyer to take a trail herd off his hands. Here, he had been told, he would get the best prices as quoted by wire from Kansas City and Chicago. Here he would get a square deal; he would be paid in cash from the huge safe that stood in plain sight behind the long bar; nor would he be robbed or rolled later on. The good reputation of the cattle buyers who frequented the Million Dollar Bar was well known along the trail.

These men were sitting in pairs at round poker tables, grouped in the south end of the big room. Some were playing solitaire when Bart O'Hara came in. Others were dozing or leaning back in chairs waiting for the runner

from the telegraph office to bring the latest quotes. Half a dozen were bellied up to the bar, playing Pachuca dice for drinks, and just beyond them Bart saw for the first time the blackboard on which cattle prices were chalked. His eyes bugged a little. According to the figures on the dusty slate, four-year-old Texas grass-fed steers were worth thirty-two dollars, F.O.B. the Longhorn Stockyards.

That was dinero!

Bart strutted unconsciously as he strode up to the bar, letting his silver-roweled Chihuahua spurs tingle musically. He put a foot on

When the Devil came after young Bart O'Shea, he just plumb adopted him, right along with his trail herd! And there was nothing Bart could do except act out the part—in a powdersmoke showdown against the old Son himself!



He put a bullet through the beer pitcher the hungry kid was carrying, and money flew all over the floor. . . .

the brass rail and leaned down on the mahogany with both forearms. The barkeeper shuffled over. His face was so pale Bart wondered if he had ever been out in the sunlight.

"You're fresh off the trail," the barkeeper said without a smile. "You're dryer than a horny toad in a cinder road. Your tongue's hangin' out so fur you had to cinch up the end of it to keep from trippin'. You want a double shot of the most potent red-eye Longhorn City has to offer with a double beer chaser. But if you had any sense you'd settle

for a drink of water." He cleared his throat. "Did you run into them Cheyennes?"

"By God," Bart said. "You took the words right out of my mouth. All I meant to say the rest of my life. But I didn't even smell an Injun, though I hear they're about."

The barkeeper set a glass of water before him. His eyes shifted to the right and left of Bart O'Shea. Two other men had entered the saloon close after Bart. One was a smallish hombre of indeterminate age, with faded blue eyes and a gray longhorn mustache. The other was younger, around twenty or so, big and husky.

"Where at's the free lunch?" the younger asked the barkeeper. "My pardners may be dyin' of thirst but I'm starvin'."

The old-timer grunted. "Take it easy, Sonny Boy," he said. His voice was pleasant and understanding. "Just set the bottle up on the bar, Gus. Where we come from we never drink nothin' but the best. Set up a pitcher of beer, too. A pot of beans and a sack of biscuits will shut up Sonny Boy."

The bartender blinked his round eyes at Bart O'Shea. Anger roweled the Texan because of the way these two hombres had flanked him and cut into his play while the bartender was waiting on him, but Bart had come a long way and his herd was not yet delivered and thirty-two times five hundred was a big stack of cartwheels. So he put a curb-bit on the quick temper that had so often gotten him into trouble, while the barkeeper ducked down for a bottle.

The old-timer was chatting, talking to Bart now. "Drinkin' water again," he said. "You got the right idea, *amigo*. After the distance we come we all ought to be drinkin' water. But like I always say, I'm too old a dog to learn new habits and Sonny is too young to have sense."

"Only thing is, I'm hungry," Sonny said. He poured a tumbler full of whisky and drank it smoothly. He followed this with a quick beer and wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand. "This stuff just growls around in your stomach, Pappy. How about that eatin' food, Gus?"

"It ain't five yet," the barkeeper said. "Our cook don't get up until five o'clock. You'll have to go down to the Dine-a-Mite."

"Then what in hell are we waitin' for?" the young man asked. "Comin', Pappy?"

"Reckon," Pappy said. "With them Cheyennes over the horizon I ain't felt like eatin' in the past week. You comin', too, Bud?" Pappy asked Bart.

"Maybe I'll drop around when I get my business done," Bart said.

"Then I'll take the bottle," Pappy suggested. "Might need a little snifter while the food's bein' cooked. Seein' yuh!"

The two men wheeled and walked out.

BART shrugged briefly, glad to be rid of them. Contemplating the coming sale of his beef he shifted feet on the rail and finished off his glass of water.

"Red-eye," he said to the bartender.

"You want it out of a bar'l?" the bartender asked. "Or you want the same kind your pardners had?"

"Barrel's good enough for me," Bart said. "As for those two *hombrecitos*, Gus, I never seen them before."

Gus did not bother to get Bart a drink. His face had become hard as marble.

"I've had that trick tried on me before," he said coldly, "and it ain't workin' this time, mister. You came in with those boys and they

knew you. The old-timer was talkin' how you always take water. The young feller named you *pardner*. You didn't kick none when they took the bottle—and, by God, you're payin' for it!"

The easy set to Bart's shoulders became an angry hunch.

"I'm payin' for the tumbler of red-eye you're drawin' from your keg," he said very softly. "And I'm payin' for nothin' else."

The barroom had become so silent the locusts in the dusty cottonwoods outside could be heard shrilling their monotonous song. The bartender's eyes rolled. A man left the dice playing group to edge down the bar. In the mirror Bart could see his brick-colored short beard and brown, hostile eyes. The man, though heavy, walked very lightly. He stopped beside Bart, putting both hands on the edge of the bar, resting his blunt fingers there lightly.

"We don't want no trouble, Tejano," he said quietly. "I seen the play. It was clear to me as buttons. What's the fee, Gus?"

"Six bucks," Gus said, doubling the price for good measure.

Bart backed away from the bar, turning stiffly to face the red-headed hombre. He was so angry now his breath wheezed as he drew it into tight lungs.

"This is between me and Gus, mister," he said.

The man shrugged. "It's between you and me, Tejano," he said. "I own this place. The name's Brick Hooper. Maybe you've heard of me."

Bart did not exchange names. Though he had heard of Brick Hooper before, the name meant little to him. He said slowly, "I had a glass of water, Hooper. If there's a charge for water I'll pay for it. But not six bucks. What's the fee for water, Gus?"

Hooper's eyes narrowed. In a flash his hands were off the bar and his Colt forty-four was out of the holster. Its muzzle was only a couple of feet from Bart's stomach.

"Suppose you turn around," he suggested in that mild voice, "and march down to the marshal's office. We'll discuss it together with him."

A man with a more mild temper might have paid up—but not Bart O'Shea. He slapped at Brick Hooper's pistol with his left hand. With his right he swung a haymaker on the red-headed hombre's bearded jaw.

BART O'SHEA quickly learned just how tough a customer was Brick Hooper. The man gave ground under the first lash against his gun arm. He went down to his knees, swinging away from Bart, and Bart's right, instead of clipping the red-bearded jaw, slid up the back of the saloonman's head to send his hat flying harmlessly. That

left Bart off balance, hanging in the air, taking quick tiny steps forward in an effort to regain his footing. Hooper let him come to just the right spot then smashed a shoulder into the pit of Bart's stomach. At the same time he pistol-whipped Bart smartly across both shins, and Bart hunched up like a jack-knife.

For a moment Bart gulped desperately for air, then in a feeble, but effective effort he jabbed his knee into Hooper's face, bringing a bull-roar out of the other. Then he felt himself falling and he turned in the air to land on hands and knees on a sawdust-covered floor that seemed to lurch like the deck of a ship in a hurricane. It was a hell of a note.

Hooper was leaning over him—Bart could see the man's boots there on the floor near him, with the weight on the balls of the feet. Very likely the saloonman still had his Colt ready to pistol-whip him again.

"You payin' up that six bucks, Tejano?"

Bart could not talk. His diaphragm was paralyzed and his breath was a sob in his lungs. But his mind was clearing now so that he knew what he had done. Cold reason told him he was a damn fool for letting his temper get the best of him, as it had so often in the past. He saw Hooper's boot shift and knew that Hooper was getting ready to kick him, but he could not move. Then the saloonman went up of his left toe to put all his weight into the kick. He let go like a shot, driving his spurred heel into Bart's short ribs.

"You goin' to shell out, Tejano?" Brick Hooper's thin voice reached Bart. "Maybe you better make it twelve bucks—to buy drinks for the boys whose peace you broke."

Bart, watching Hooper's boots, saw the shift of feet and knew that the next one was going to be in the face. He knew that he was absolutely alone, too, and that nobody was going to stop Hooper; nobody was willing to risk helping a Texan. So Bart huddled there, his clenched hands full of sawdust. Hooper was going up on his toes again, his foot swinging back. Then Bart collapsed, letting his elbows go so he hit the sawdust face-first while the boot sailed harmlessly over his head.

He rolled and jerked up his knees to get Hooper's left leg into a trap between thigh and stomach. He smashed his right fist into the back of Hooper's knee, setting that hombre right down on the floor. With his left he ground sawdust into the saloonman's face—and felt a prickling burn of powder as the redhead fired point blank at him and missed.

Then he fell back, rolling over, reaching for a bar stool while Hooper clawed at his blinded eyes. Bart came to his knees and put all the weight of his wide shoulders into one crippling blow. He missed Hooper's red head, fell forward a little under the thrust of the blow and smashed the stool over the saloon-

man's gun arm. Hooper's finger tripped the trigger once more before his hand went lax and the pistol hopped crazily into the air. Bart O'Shea grabbed for it, caught it on the fly, and the redhead's fancy weapon nestled neatly into his fist.

He was still on his knees, hunkered down so the big Chihuahua rowels tickled his backside. The saloonman was holding onto his broken wrist with his left hand and his trigger finger angled off queerly. He looked as if he was about to be sick.

Bart O'Shea didn't give a damn. He moved the pistol muzzle in a short arc.

"Anyone pickin' up this gent's hand?"

The men at the tables shook their heads. Very carefully Gus set down the bungstarter with which he had armed himself. A twelve-year-old boy rushed in the front door shouting.

"Ch!—up one dollar—K. C.—"

The boy's eyes popped and his mouth shut so sharply the click of his teeth almost sounded like poker chips in a midnight game. He stood at the door gaping at Bart O'Shea.

Thirty-three bucks, Bart thought, times five hundred—a fortune nearly lost for six lousy bucks and a hot temper. He struggled to his feet, his knees shaky as a new-born colt's.

"With your permission, gents—"

He backed toward the door. The kid from the telegraph office fled, crashing into a man who had just come up the boardwalk from the west. They were tangled there for a second when Bart came out of the Million Dollar Bar with the .44 caliber pistol in his fist. Bart got a quick glance at a marshal's badge on the big man's suspenders and knew this was his chance to escape while the frightened boy still balked the law officer. He wheeled toward his horse, then halted as if he had collided with a brick wall.

There was a girl standing between Bart and his mount. She seemed to have arrived there quite by accident and was frozen there by fear. Bart could have ducked past her or used her to help his escape if he had been that kind of a man. She was no real barrier at all.

"No—no—" she cried in a voice so low it might have been the whimpering of a child. Her hands were up before her, as if to hold him back.

Then the marshal was free of the youngster and he was drawling, "Looks like Hooper's fancy hawg-leg, Tex. Better give it back before you get into more trouble."

Men were crowding in from everywhere. The girl was pushing through the ranks. Bart had lost his chance to run. He glanced at the pistol and tossed it over the top of the batwing doors into the saloon where it landed with a dull thud on the sawdusted floor. Calmly the marshal glanced inside.

"If you got a complaint, Brick," he said, "come down to the jailhouse." To Bart he

added, "We'll just kind of saunter over there, Tex, and wait on him."

BART'S knees had stopped shaking when he reached the marshal's office but his left side had begun to pain so sharply he knew that Hooper had broken a rib or two for him when he delivered himself of that savage kick. It felt as if a jackknife had been jabbed into his side and were constantly being wriggled back and forth—and blind fury made a red line across Bart's eyes.

Why, he wondered bitterly, had he let that girl stop him? In a second he could have been down the nearby alley—in a minute he could have crossed the tracks and been on the prairie. Instead he was here in the jail of a hostile town because a barman had run a sandy on him and a girl's blue eyes had loomed up, frightened and clear to block his escape.

"Take her easy," the marshal was saying. "You look all tied up like a rawhide knot on a wet day."

Bart gave the marshal a brief glance and saw a big, amiable-looking man. The marshal handed him a cigar. When Bart bit off the end the lawman held a light until the smoke glowed redly. Then the big man eased back in a swivel chair and stuck his feet on a desk.

"Set," the marshal suggested. Instead Bart walked over to the window where he could look out onto Railroad Avenue. Some of the town's youngsters had drifted toward jail to be in on possible excitement. The marshal leaned over to spit into a brass cuspidor under his gun rack. "You boys come up the trail—dust and bawlin' beef an' no women—lousy chuck. I know how it is. You feel wild and woolly and ready for a frolic. All right—we expect that. Have your fun. You've earned it. Only don't try beatin' up honest citizens."

Bart said bitterly, "They pulled a whizzer on me, marshal. The hombre calls himself Brick Hooper—" He quit abruptly. What was the use of talking, he thought and went back to the window. Gus was coming down the street, wearing a derby hat, his broad face pale and his brow wrinkled under the narrow brim. A couple of youngsters followed him expectantly and a mangy old dog trailed them. "Here comes one of your honest citizens," Bart said.

"Brick?" the marshal asked.

"No."

Gus shuffled down the corridor into the open door. His hat was set absolutely square on his bald head. Though he had been completely at home behind the bar, he seemed frightened and lost here, his little eyes shuttling nervously. The marshal offered him a cigar, too, but Gus shook his head.

"Brick can't come," he said. "He's sick. We had to lug him over to the sawbones. He's got a busted wrist and broken finger. He ain't

feelin' so good in general." His eyes shifted to Bart and he was afraid. "How come you ain't relieved this killer of his shootin' iron, Sam?"

"I don't have any complaint against him," the marshal said evenly, "He ain't used his own gun. And there ain't any law in this town against carryin' deadly weapons in public."

Gus squeezed farther into the doorway, as if he regretted very much that he had come here. "Him and his two pardners worked me for a bottle of my best bourbon. When Brick tried to collect, this feller beat the hell out of him."

The old crimson anger was coming to a boil again in Bart. He started to shout, then bit it back. In a voice he knew was too excited he said, "I never saw these hombres before, marshal. I'll swear it on a Bible. Look—I was all alone. I came ahead of my herd to find a buyer, and them two hombres followed me into the Million Dollar." He was staring at Gus while he talked, and Gus was licking his pale, thick lips while a thin bead of sweat grew on his longish upper lip. It was beginning to occur to Bart that Gus might not have known the strangers, either. Gus lifted his derby to wipe the top of his head with a handkerchief.

Bart said, "One of these hombres was a big, young feller. Wanted something to eat. The other was a little guy, smooth talker, with a mustache big enough for somebody twice his size."

The marshal said, "Ah—" He did not explain. His eyes were veiled. His smooth voice suddenly became cold, demanding. "You swearing out a warrant against this hombre, Gus?" he asked sharply.

The old fear leaped across Gus's pale eyes. "Brick'll kill me if I don't." He shuddered. His eyes could not hold steady. His glance flitted from Bart's pistol to Bart's jaw, to his eyes. "No," he said suddenly. "Maybe he ain't lyin'."

Then the marshal was on his feet. He cursed briefly, eloquently, and with considerable talent. He discussed several cross-bred, malformed animals he would prefer as company to Gus, and after the bartender had fled he delivered an ultimatum to Bart.

"Next time you're in a ruckus," he said, "I won't even ask questions. And if you're in town after sunset I'll run you out as a vagrant." He jerked a thumb at the door. "Git!"

CHAPTER TWO

In Hell For Breakfast

BART fetched his horse from the rack in front of the Million Dollar Bar and led it down the street to the Gateway Livery Stable and Wagon Yard. This place seemed

to be peopled chiefly with buffalo hunters and bone gatherers, so Bart crossed Railroad Avenue, went up Third Street one block, turned left to see what he might find along General Dodge Avenue. He had gone less than half a block along that street when a sign struck him with the impact of a mule's kick.

DINE-A-MITE CAFE

Minnie Harris
Prop.

He stared at it for a long while, then shook his head and led his horse to the rack where two old crowbaits lolled. He stopped a moment to look up and down General Dodge Avenue. A couple of women were window-shopping over toward Main Street. The youngsters who had followed Gus to jail had given up when no excitement developed. Yet Bart had the feeling that he was being tailed. Added to this was a premonition that he was going to fall into a deep, dark hole or that something was about to drop on him. It made him approach the café with considerable caution.

It could not possibly be true—but sitting at a small table at the rear of the otherwise untenanted café, eating a meal, were the two men who had pulled that bare-faced rusty on him. They had said they were coming over here, and here they were!

Sonny Boy concentrated on his victuals, eating with a steady efficiency. The old-timer grinned when Bart came into the room and waved the bottle of Gus's best at him.

"Been savin' some for you, *amigo*," he called cheerfully. "Pull up a chair. Have a steak. Beans. Best fried potatoes in the state, bar none."

The younger man stuck to his work. Bart O'Shea felt as if he was walking on hard-boiled eggs. Neither of these men showed any evidence of guilt. Both acted as if what they had done at the Million Dollar Bar was perfectly normal and they treated Bart O'Shea as a friend. Even now Pappy was pouring Bart a drink—and Bart noticed that three places had been set at the table. Blood beat through Bart's ears with a weird thrumming. His fingers felt stiff and numb as if his arms had gone to sleep. He stopped behind the chair before the third place set at the table and rested his hands on the high back, gripping it with violence.

Pappy clicked his glass against the one he had filled for Bart.

"To old times, *amigo*, and new," he toasted loudly. "Take the weight off the soles of your boots and put the seat of your pants to work. Sonny Boy would rather eat than fish—an' he sure does like fishin'. Think nothin' of his bad manners."

The younger man leaned back in his chair and bawled in the direction of the kitchen:

"Where at's them beans?"

"Comin'," the waitress answered.

Bart juggled the chair as if it was on rockers. This fantastic business made talk almost impossible. Finally he got it out.

"Since you boys left the Million Dollar I been shot at twice, pistol-whipped once, kicked in the ribs and took to jail," he said. "I've been ordered out of town—"

The younger man showed interest. Pappy looked absolutely horrified.

"You didn't waste no time. Hey—Sonny?"

"Heck, no," Sonny Boy said. "And such a nice, easy-goin' sort of hombre, too. Drinks water—"

The waitress had come with the beans. She placed them on the table before Sonny who promptly filled his plate.

"You want to order, mister?" the waitress asked.

"I'll eat later," Bart said.

The waitress drifted to the forward part of the café, where a couple of newcomers were waiting by the counter. Bart tapped the legs of his chair on the floor.

"If the marshal wasn't followin' me," he said tensely, "I'd give both you hombres a sample of what I've been takin' since you picked up that bottle. I'd give you a nice big sample. And if I didn't have a herd waiting for me down-trail I reckon I'd give it to you anyhow and take a chance on the marshal."

Pappy's face was very expressive. He could turn from friendly to horrified; and now he looked as if he had just seen a ghost.

"Our pardner's feelin' uppity today, ain't he, Sonny Boy," he said. "Maybe we better drift. Maybe we better go back to the Million Dollar and get us another bottle from Gus."

The younger one grunted through a mouthful of beans and shoved his chair back. He stuffed a couple of biscuits into a jacket pocket. With only the greatest of effort Bart restrained himself. He knew that the marshal meant business—and he realized that if he did not get his herd into town pronto and sold he stood a chance of losing everything. With reservation Indians on the loose and rustlers everywhere, no herd was safe on the trail these days—nor was it really secure until it was on the cars and had been paid for. So Bart let the two strange men leave the restaurant and grimly followed. At the door he was stopped by the newcomers who had apparently been waiting for him. Vaguely he recognized them as a couple of buyers who had been at the Million Dollar Bar.

"The name's Adam Hannagan," one of the men said. "Buying for the Gold Star Packing Company. My pardner—Ezra Combes."

"Glad to know you, Hannagan, Combes," Bart shook hands with them. "Bart O'Shea from Texas."

"If you've got a herd," Hannagan said

quickly, "we're prepared to pay you an attractive price."

Bart took a very deep breath. After the ruckus in the Million Dollar Bar he had thought he would have to go elsewhere for a buyer. But these men looked honest enough, so he laid all his cards on the table.

"I have five hundred heavy four-year-old Texas steers, more or less," he said. "They're twenty miles below here on Massacre Creek on good water and good grass. We took our time on the trail. The beef's all in shape, ready to ship."

"When can you deliver?" Combes asked.

"Tomorrow—sunset," Bart said.

"We'll give you forty bucks a head, the first man said, "if you keep your mouth shut about it."

The incredible price stopped Bart a moment. He thought he could smell another rusty now.

"What's the hooker?" he asked.

"This—" Hannagan glanced around to see if he was being overheard. He drew pictures on his hand with his forefinger. "We know something you might not know." He glanced about again, and the other man nodded to go ahead. "Them Cheyenne Injuns who jumped the reservation down in the Territory are headed this way. The army at Camp Supply isn't letting any more herds through. The cavalry over to Fort Longhorn is sending out a troop to cut off these Injuns. There's no telling how long it'll be before any more beef comes up the trail."

"But what's that got to do with forty-dollar cows?"

"Everything!" Combes cut in. "We're being straight with you, mister. We know gens who've been selling futures. They'll have to cover or go to jail. When the herds stop coming they'll be desperate and they'll buy anything. Steers like yours might go to fifty. Some of the boys think this Injun business won't make any difference at all. But we're takin' a gamble—startin' with your herd."

Bart made up his mind in a hurry. He could have gambled, too, but he owed something to these men because they had told him what was up. And after all the tough luck he had had this day he could hardly hope for any luck better than the present.

"Okay, Hannagan, Combes," he said. "The bunch is yours. They'll be in the pens tomorrow night."

They shook again. While his hand clasped Hannagan's the cattle buyer looked straight into Bart's eyes and said, "Watch out for Hooper. He's got a temper. And if that herd ain't in the yards by tomorrow sunset the deal's off. If the army catches those Injuns the picture will change in a flash."

"I'll have them there," Bart said.

The two men started for the door. To make this delivery Bart would have to move right

along. But the waitress's dry voice stopped him on the threshold.

"Just a second, *amigo*," she said. "Your pardners didn't pay for their meal." She cleared her throat. "It's five dollars and forty cents."

THE buyers watched him curiously while the throbbing in his temples grew to a steady hot beat. He began counting to himself and, with a hand that seemed unwilling to do his bidding, he reached into his pocket for the money. He laid six silver dollars on the counter in a straight row.

Hannagan said doubtfully: "Down to the Million Dollar Bar—"

Bart let out his breath in a whistle.

"Just having a little joke," he said.

"Leave him alone," Combes said to Hannagan. "It's his herd we want. It ain't up to us to see to it that he pays his bills."

"Okay—okay," Hannagan said. "The deal's still on, O'Shea. We pay off at the Million Dollar Bar."

Bart was too angry to answer. He ignored the change the waitress had ostentatiously thrown onto the counter and strode from the place ahead of the buyers. The two crowbait horses had gone from the rack. Bart's mount pricked up its ears and made a slight snuffing sound. Though Bart could see only the broad back of the man staring into the window of the saddle shop across the street he was pretty sure it was the marshal. A girl a couple of doors downstreet on this side made a little motion of her hand to Bart and then immediately went back to her window shopping, as if she had regretted her act. Yet in that brief glance he had of her Bart was pretty sure she was the same girl who had stopped him outside the Million Dollar Bar when she had been backing away from his fight with Brick Hooper.

Now she was moving toward Main Street, stopping to glance into other store windows. The marshal had vanished. Probably he had gone into the saddle shop where he could watch Bart from the shadows. Bart neither knew nor cared. He had expected to be followed and he intended keeping out of trouble.

A couple of small boys running toward Main Street drew his attention to a knot of people gathered there at the corner. Peering into the sun Bart saw the big marshal shoving through the group there. *So that's where he went*, he thought and climbed into the saddle to trot his horse along General Dodge Avenue toward the excitement on Main Street. When he passed the girl he slowed down to give her a chance to talk if she wished to. Resolutely she ignored him, so he went on to where the crowd was gathering.

Everyone was staring into Main Street. The marshal had broken through to an open space

there and was bellowing for peace. In the center of Main Street a very dirty-looking man sat the rickety seat of a farm wagon drawn by two nearly dead mules who stood brace-legged and drooling. The man was bawling:

"I'm tellin' yuh—Injuns—a couple hundred of 'em," he howled. "Jumped us three-four hours ago. Killed wife and kids. Run off all my stock. I was haulin' in hay when—"

He broke down completely. The marshal climbed up onto the wagon and tried to get some sense out of him. The man just sat there crying and finally the marshal had to hoist him up and expose him to the crowd.

"Anybody know this galoot?" he asked. "Anybody know where he come from?"

"Got a ranch down to Three Fork," somebody said. The man nodded dumbly and kept on wailing about his wife and kids. The one with the information added, "That's forty miles from here. He didn't waste much time comin' in. But if them Injuns are headed this way—"

"They ain't coming this way," the marshal shouted. "They wouldn't attack a town the size of Longhorn City."

"You never can tell what an Injun'll do," somebody argued.

The marshal was about to answer him when a troop of cavalry trotted into Main Street from Railroad Avenue. The lieutenant crisply gave the order to halt and as crisply rode up to the wagon and saluted the marshal.

"What's ailin' him?" the lieutenant asked.

"His family's wiped out by Cheyennes, down to Three Fork—"

Everybody was talking at once now, all telling the lieutenant what had happened. Over it all Bart heard the officer say that he already knew about the raided farm. A government scout had brought the news an hour ago but had not reported that there were any survivors. A couple of troops of cavalry were coming up from Camp Supply to get the Cheyenne in the rear and he was riding to outflank them. Then Bart saw that the girl had come up to stand by his stirrup. He nodded to her and stepped down from the saddle.

"You have to help me," was her abrupt greeting.

The appeal in her eyes was powerful, and now that she was before him and Bart could really see her, she was a very heady draught. It was not that she was especially pretty. Her mouth was too wide for that and her nose too short and her eyes too big. It was something beyond that, something in her sturdy young spirit and the way she planted her boots firmly on the ground.

Bart said, "Tomorrow I'll help you—or the day after, miss. But I can't do it today. I've got a little chore of my own to do first."

"We're both Texans," she said doggedly.

"We have to stick together, Mr.—Mr. O'Shea."

Suspicion hit him. "How'd you know my name?" he asked.

Her eyes lifted momentarily in a blue flash. "I'm Dallas Key," she said. "My brother's herd is on the Massacre beside yours. I recognized the brand on your horse in front of that saloon and was waiting to speak to you. Will you—" She stopped then and he thought that she appeared to be very angry with him. "Your pardners framed my brother into jail last night," she said. "You must get him out."

"Now, look here—" Bart said. The lieutenant had wheeled his horse to ride back to his troopers. The marshal had left the wagon after turning the hysterical rancher over to a member of the crowd. All about men were talking excitedly. Then Bart was looking into the girl's blue eyes and for a moment that was all he knew. "I seem to be saddled with those two hombres," he said. "They're like the measles. I can't shake 'em. But I never—"

The girl's blue eyes were suddenly veiled. She said rather loudly. "That's all right, Mr. O'Shea. Just forget I ever spoke to you."

The crowd had begun to drift around aimlessly and the girl turned away from Bart. He pulled her back with a hand on her arm, swinging her to face him. There was high color in her cheeks and her eyes did not hold steady. The marshal had come up, too.

"Bothering you, Miss Key?" he asked.

"No," she said hastily.

Bart found that it was pleasant holding onto the girl, and as quickly he was embarrassed and let go.

"Beat it," he said to the marshal. "Run away."

The marshal's gray eyes were the color of cast iron. He said, "In a minute, Tex." He took out a paper he had been carrying in a breast pocket. It was a summons, a complaint signed very unsteadily by Brick Hooper's left hand. The marshal gave it to Bart who smiled.

"Thanks for the paper, marshal," Bart said. "Someday it'll come in handy for kindling a campfire."

The marshal was a block of granite. "Last night this lady's brother robbed a couple of honest buffalo hunters," he said. The girl made a convulsive movement beside Bart and sucked in a lungful of air. Hastily the marshal returned to Bart.

"A couple of honest buffalo hunters said the brother of this lady robbed them. He had some help—a pair of gentlemen known as The Hungry Kid and Gramp—a pair you seem to know, too."

Suddenly Bart began to savvy it all—The Hungry Kid and Gramp—a pair known all up and down the trail clear from Chihuahua to Canada—calling themselves Sonny Boy and Pappy for the time being—two light-spirited

and light-fingered gentlemen who loved everyone, according to their story. They had made suckers of him and of the girl's brother just as they had made fools of a hundred people before this. And now Bart was not angry any more. He began to grin.

"My pardners," he said to the marshal.

The marshal said, "I'll give you the same proposition I gave Jim Key." Jim, Bart reckoned, was the girl's brother. "You give me the inside on Gramp and the Hungry Kid and I'll tear up the summons. I know they're mixed up with all this hell-raising but I can't ever catch them at it."

Bart realized that the time had long since passed when there was any point in denying that he knew those two gentlemen of the long rope and the longer trail. They had him over a barrel. Everyone believed he was their partner.

"And if I don't spill the beans?" Bart asked.

"Jail!"

The girl shouted in sudden fury, "I tell you, marshal, Jim never met those men before and I never saw O'Shea until today! You've got to let Jim—"

"Forget it, miss," Bart said softly to the girl. "I'll say a good word for your brother. Lead the way, marshal."

And it was not until the heavy plank door slammed shut that he remembered the deal he had made with Adam Hannagan and Ezra Combes, concerning his herd. He had even forgotten the Indians. Five hundred steers at forty bucks a head was money you could not even dream up. But he had tossed it away for a pair of distrustful blue eyes.

THERE was no quiet in the jail, which was one great room surrounded by wooden bunks made of the same sort of planks that formed the sidewalks for the proud city of Longhorn. A buffalo hunter gone crazy from too much time alone on the plains kept on stalking other prisoners and imitating gun sounds. They could have put up with that, except for the fact that he always insisted on skinning them. This caused many a fight.

Then there was the worried young man who had to tell Bart his troubles. These were chiefly about a couple of men he had met.

"If you ever run into those hombres," he told Bart, "you might just as well cut your throat and beat them to it. They look just like a harmless old *paisano* and his dumb son. But first thing you know—"

"They got you framed into a charge of robbing a buffalo hunter or two," Bart said.

"Exactly," the young man said. "That's it exactly." He turned his head sidewise, suspicion beginning to show in his expression. Then the friendliness left him and he was completely hostile. "If the marshal sent you here to sound me out you're wasting your

time," he said. "I never even heard of the Hungry Kid or of Gramp until they framed me. It's a fact, mister. I told the marshal the truth, and that's all I got to tell."

"What was that, Jim?" Bart asked.

"I met those hombres at the mouth of an alley," Jim Key said quickly. "They said there were a couple of sick men up that alley and I should watch them while they went for a sawbones. So I went up that alley and saw a piece of lead pipe on the ground and picked it up to look at it. Then the marshal pinched me. He said I knocked down those buffalo hunters with the pipe."

Bart just sat back and laughed. He roared so loud the other inmates stared at him as if he had suddenly cracked up. The crazy buffalo hunter started to angle around for a good shot at Bart with his imaginary gun. Another man edged over to the big plank door. Every jail is likely to have its stool pigeon and Bart suspected that this man was the holder of the local office. Jim Key seemed more suspicious than ever.

"I should have kept my big mouth shut," Jim Key said.

"Sure," Bart said.

He quit laughing and got up quickly to move almost silently over toward the door. The stool pigeon hopped clear away from the small square opening in the heavy planks.

"So they don't know each other, huh?" Bart heard the jailer say. Then Bart's face was in the opening and the jailer's face fell.

Bart snapped, "Git the marshal, mister. Go find the Key girl. I want to talk to them."

The jailer gulped a couple of times, then hobbled down the hallway toward the front of the jail house.

CHAPTER THREE

Cut-Price On Glory

THERE was mounting excitement in Longhorn City that Bart could feel even through the thick walls of the jail. Men were shouting. Small cavalcades trotted up and down the streets. Over near the railroad depot someone was making a speech that reverberated from one end of the town to the other. And when the marshal came in answer to Bart's summons the cool gray of his steady eyes was disturbed and he was sweating under his hatband, though it was not a hot evening.

"Trouble comes in three's," the marshal said. "You and your pals. These Indians. Now what?"

"I want to put up bail and get out of here," Bart said.

"Damn it!" the marshal swore. "We didn't set bail—and we aren't going to set bail until this Indian trouble is over. I'm not taking any

chances on having you wandering around the streets when we're likely to be attacked by a bunch of Cheyennes."

"A while ago up on Main Street you were claiming—" Bart started.

"I know what I said," the marshal cut in with irritation. "Things have changed. Another feller came in half an hour ago. The Indians split. That lieutenant is chasing one bunch of them, trying to get them into a favorable spot for a fight. The other bunch is coming this way. We're organizing a militia."

"You going after them?" Bart asked.

"Damn right," the marshal said. "We got an army. We'll be back in a couple days and meanwhile you can set here safe and snug."

The marshal turned to leave and Bart stopped him with: "I'm ready to give you the lowdown on my pardners, mister."

The marshal swung on his toes. His eyes were fierce now. He said angrily, "That'll keep."

Bart shrugged. "Okay," he said as if it did not matter, and moved away from the square window on the door.

That brought the marshal back.

"Okay, O'Shea," he said. "But make it snappy."

"I want out first," Bart said.

Someone was shouting down the corridor. "Come on, Sam. We're just about ready to ride. Where in hell are you?"

"Coming," the marshal answered. To the jailer he said, "Get the keys. You better be on the level, O'Shea."

"You don't need to worry about that," Bart said. "My pal, Jim Key, wants out, too."

The marshal stared at him with deep suspicion. Slowly he began to shake his head. "Key stays in," he said. "You can call him a hostage—or something. He stays in until I'm sure of you and your pardners."

He stopped abruptly, but in that second had given himself away. The marshal knew that Jim Key had not been mixed up with the Hungry Kid and Gramp, and he probably knew that Bart was not mixed up with them either. Bart had pulled a long bluff and had made something of it. Now the jailer was turning the big key on the lock and the marshal slipped the bolt. Bart stepped into the corridor. Behind him Jim Key thought he had been double-crossed again and began to curse. Instantly the whole jail was in an uproar.

But Bart was free and the marshal hurried him away from the racket.

"The facts of the case are these," Bart told the marshal. "There's two-three outfits along the Massacre. We knew the Indians were coming for a long time. So we figured this out. While you and the whole town are chasing after the Cheyennes Gramp and Hungry

and the boys are going to drive that beef into town and sell it. Then—maybe—they'll do a little careful looting. Rob a bank, or something."

"But, damn it," the marshal said. "Nobody knew those Injuns were going to split and head for town or that we'd go chasing them. Your story just don't hold water."

"Sure it does," Bart said evenly. "You see, we had to be sure you'd get up a posse. So one of our boys brought the news that the Cheyennes had split—just to lead you off the trail."

"An' I suppose," the marshal said with measured sarcasm, "these pardners of yours will just talk your trail bosses into bringing the herds up to Longhorn. Like that!"

"Like that!" Bart said. "They're already boogered—scared of the Injuns that have been just over the horizon all the way up from the Red River. They'd move in a second. Gramp's a great talker. He could convince anybody of anything. He could, for instance—" Bart grinned thinly—"convince you that he and I are pardners and that Jim Key robbed a couple of buffalo hunters."

"Well, you are," the marshal roared, "and he did!"

But the officer had already given himself away concerning Jim Key, and Bart laughed at him and said, "Then put me back in jail."

The Key girl was hurrying across the street. She came up the jail steps now and her eyes looked in appeal at the marshal.

"Did he clear Jim?" she asked. "Are you letting him out?"

"He didn't clear anything," the marshal said.

The girl looked as if she had been slapped.

THEY rode out from Longhorn City at sunset. There were more than a hundred men in the party—townsmen, gamblers, buffalo hunters, cowboys and railroad men. A couple of dude Englishmen with expensive sporting rifles went along just for the fun, hopping up and down on their little saddles. A spring wagon followed the Englishmen with their camping equipment. Half a dozen heavier wagons, Conestogas, trailed along behind the motley army, loaded with food and whiskey. The sawbones was present tooling his buckboard and at the very rear of the party were four girls from the Crimson Ballroom who claimed they had come along to serve coffee and cake to the brave boys—and maybe to bring back a scalp or two. Just in case the opportunity presented itself, each carried a small knife tucked behind a garter.

Bart saw Brick Hooper in the crowd, too, his hand in a white bandage strapped to his chest. But Bart stayed away from Brick and by the time the army had straggled past the

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

outskirts of town Bart was far in the lead,
sided by the marshal.

They rode silently, these two, each with his
own thoughts and Bart with a bit of prayer
added. He had not made up his story from
whole cloth—he had constructed it piece by
piece, slowly and carefully from many small
items and hunches. It seemed improbable that
the leaders of both trail outfits should acci-
dentally fall afoul of the law at the same time.
So it must have been planned that the Hungry
Kid and Gramp would compromise Jim Key
and Bart O'Shea into the jug, and if such a
thing was planned there must be reason be-
hind it. That, he believed, was substantially
as he had described it to the marshal.

Now the lawman dropped back to ride closer
to Bart O'Shea, and when Bart glanced about
he saw that a little knot of horsemen had de-
tached itself from the rest of the irregular
army. The white bandage of Brick Hooper's
hand identified the saloonman at a distance.
The marshal cut in close enough to talk to
Bart.

"I been thinking, O'Shea," he said. "You
made up that story back there in the jail."

Bart said "I have a herd on the Massacre—
right alongside one owned by that Key boy.
So I did some thinking, too, mister, and the
only answer I could find was the one I gave."

"But if they figure on selling for cash,"
the marshal said, "they'll be disappointed.
Brick Hooper's the only one who knows the
combination to that safe where the buyers
keep their cash money. And Brick's with us."

Bart said, "Brick's comin' up now, Marshal.
Maybe his hand hurts and he's goin' back
home."

Brick Hooper had four cattle buyers with
him, and they were converging in an arc that
threw an envelope around the marshal and
Bart O'Shea. The marshal halted. Bart
stopped, too. A tiny warning twitched around
at the base of his brain. He had expected
trouble from Hooper ever since he had
spotted the saloonman in the posse. Now it
was coming to a head.

Brick squared off before the marshal. "We
don't like being guided by a jailbird," he said
shortly.

The army was stretched out over the prairie.
Those in the lead kept on coming in jagged
segments. The Crimson Ballroom girls were
singing a bawdy song in their roughly pleasant
voices. Hooper's horse fiddle-footed, sensing
the tension of the man on his back. But the
marshal was gray and cold again.

"I'm leading this outfit," he said, "and I
don't give a damn whether you like it or not."

Another group of riders slowed down and
halted behind Brick Hooper's band. They

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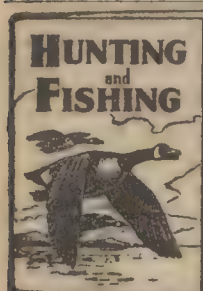
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

were belligerent. They had been talking about this thing back there on the prairie. Brick Hooper had passed the story that they were probably being tricked and he had waited until he was sure of backing.

"What's more," Brick said, "we don't like the direction you're headed in. We figure the Indians are more northerly, Sam. We pay your wages and, by God, you're going to do what we want."

Someone in the crowd yipped, "That's talkin', Brick."

The uproar was general. The girls had quit their singing. After a while the prairie went quiet again except for the creak of rigs, the sounds of horses and the occasional clearing of a man's throat.

"Looks like you pick up the marbles," the marshal said quietly. "I'll take this feller to town, Brick. You can lead the army to glorious victory."

There was no change in the man's flat tone which was as gray as his eyes. But Bart saw something in the twitch of Hooper's mouth that made him know instant and sharp fear.

"Guess again," Hooper said to the marshal. "We don't know what your play is with this jailbird, but we do figure you ain't going to get away with it. The posse is goin' after the Injuns, but me and my boys here are putting you under arrest and taking you back to town."

"No," the marshal said, "you are not putting us under arrest, Brick."

ONCE in a long while you meet a man you know instinctively might make a partner. Once in a lifetime, maybe, you meet a girl who, with certain variations, fits the same specifications. Bart was beginning to believe he had met both today—and the way he knew it was that with both of them he instinctively knew what they were thinking. It had taken a while to catch onto the marshal, but now when the lawman said "No," Bart knew exactly what he had to do and he did it in a flash.

Brick Hooper was sitting aslant his saddle, a full length ahead of his men. Because his right hand was out of commission he had shoved his pistol into his belt with the butt forward for a cross-belly draw with his left hand. He would be slow—but Bart would still have to move mighty fast—and he took Hooper when that hombre was still busy with the marshal.

Bart rolled his big Chihuahua spurs and hopped his horse clear across the open space between himself and Brick. He got his left around Hooper's waist to pin Hooper's left arm against his chest, and he was just a small

POWDERSMOKE PARDNERS

fraction of a second behind Hooper in getting to the gun in the saloonman's waistband. Bart's fingers closed over Hooper's, and Hooper froze.

"Just ease up a mite," Bart said. Hooper's left under Bart's relaxed, and Bart took the pistol.

Yonderly the marshal sat very straight in his saddle. He had not drawn his gun or reached for the carbine in the boot slung from the horn.

"Back off a little, O'Shea," the marshal said. Bart trotted the two horses away several yards. "This is a life and death matter, boys," the marshal went on. "Not a picnic. Hooper mutinied. He's going to jail for it. We can't put a hundred men in that jail but, by God, if anybody else wants to turn traitor we'll find some place to lock him up. Because this ain't a party any more, you girls are goin' back to town, too. The rest of you are going to file past me and keep going, due west. We'll meet at Johnson's ranch. There we'll split. One bunch will go northerly and the other southerly. And we'll keep on going until we find the Injuns." He stopped a moment to judge the temper of the posse then added, "If any of you try anything funny O'Shea's going to shoot Hooper first."

Brick Hooper wheezed as he breathed. Bart had a good grip on him, and he kept to the right side where Hooper could not fight back. "I was only doing what I thought best," Hooper said huskily.

"If he opens his mouth again plug him," the marshal said in that awesome gray voice. To the men he added, "Get going."

They were slow to start. A couple of Texas cowboys who did not give a damn one way or the other as long as they eventually met up with a good fight broke the deadlock. The Englishmen followed. Then Brick Hooper's men fell in and the whole group was trotting toward Johnson's. They went by in the darkness, raising a thin, acrid dust that sifted down over the marshal, Bart O'Shea and the captured saloonman. The surrey carrying the four girls rattled up. They were scared stiff.

"We can't go back, Sam," one of them told the marshal. "We don't know the way."

"I want you girls to meet Bart O'Shea," he said. "Jailbird, hell-raiser, mind-reader and liar. He'll show you the way back. And don't let Brick go, Bart. I want a nice long talk with him when I get back."

The marshal wheeled and rode away into the dusty night. Bart let go of Brick Hooper but kept the man's split reins. After a moment he lifted his horse to a trot toward Longhorn City. The girls trailed along. A mile or two and they broke into song again.

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LONGHORN CITY was quiet and tense, and dawn was not far away when Bart rode past the outposts with his prisoner and the bevy of frail charges. Guards stopped them, wanting to know what had happened, then let them go on. In front of the Million Dollar Bar Bart halted again. He stepped from the saddle to ease his pants and noticed dawn in the sky.

"G'night, girls," Bart said.

"You were wonderful, Mister O'Shea," one of the girls said.

Bart said mildly, "Run along." Then he motioned for Hooper to get down. "Wake up Gus," he said.

Brick said, "Look, O'Shea, I got nothing against you. Even this broken wrist. Maybe these fellers were using you. I don't know. I'll take your word for it. One thing cancels the other."

"Wake up Gus," Bart repeated slowly.

Brick had trouble getting down from his horse. He kicked on the saloon door until a light showed inside and Gus came to glance through the peep-hole.

"Open up," Hooper said.

Gus opened the door a crack and Brick dove for it. But Bart had been expecting an attempt at breaking away and tripped Brick neatly.

Brick just stared at Bart with black hatred in his chocolate brown eyes. Gus was shivering mightily in a nightshirt and Chinese slippers. Lamplight danced all over the room. Still watching Brick, Bart said to Gus:

"Set the lamp on the table. Then go down to the jail and get a young feller name of Key. Bring him here."

"Nightshirt—" Gus said.

"You go get him," Bart threatened.

Gus had never been noted for his bravery, but he was a modest man and he scurried away, praying for dawn to keep back another few minutes. It did not take him long to return with Jim Key. The young Texan was sleepy-eyed but awake in an instant when he saw Brick Hooper lying on the floor.

"I had something just like this pulled on me before," Key said bitterly. "You can't pull it on me, too, O'Shea."

"Had a good night's sleep?" Bart asked.

"What's that got to do with this?"

"Only this," Bart said. "I'm going to bed. Somebody has to keep an eye on Hooper. You're elected." With that Bart turned to the barkeep. "Gus—get me a room. Keep Hooper out of sight," he said to Jim. Then he remembered the girls and the outpost guards. They would spread the story all over town that Brick Hooper was a prisoner. "Pardon me," he said. "I'll be back."

BART had too many things to think about when he got back to the Million Dollar Bar so he counted them all up on his fingers and threw them away and went to sleep. At four o'clock in the afternoon Gus woke him. Gus's wide, pale face was creased with anxiety.

"Couple of men from the Gold Star Packing Company want to see you," Gus said.

"You tell them I was here?"

"No," Gus said. "They said you were supposed to deliver some beef. The market's jumping all over. They're startin' to worry. They said they heard you were with that posse chasing Injuns and never would bring in your steers."

Bart said, "Tell them anything you want only don't let on I'm here."

Jim Key was obviously relieved when Bart showed up. Bart said, "Amble down to the yards, Jim, and keep an eye open for cattle coming up from Texas, will you?"

The young Texan was glad to get out of there. Bart took the pistol from his holster and settled down in one of Hooper's big arm-chairs with the .44 in his lap. Hooper stared at him, red-eyed.

"I gotta have a sawbones for this hand," he growled. "When the marshal gets back I'm goin' to tell him what you done to me, O'Shea. You're goin' to be so sorry—"

Bart grinned at him. "I got to do a little business downstairs, Brick," he said. "Maybe you can help me. I'm selling five hundred steers to the Gold Star Packing Company. My friend, Jim Key, has a mixed herd he is selling, too."

"I don't know a thing about your beef—"

"Course not," Bart said. "Some—uh—agents of mine are bringing this beef up from the Massacre today. They're goin' to handle the deal with Hannagan and Combes. These agents of mine are a little guy with a big mustache and a big guy with an appetite. You've met them."

"I don't know anything about them."

"Your bartender sold them a bottle of your best whiskey the other day. Remember?" Hooper did not answer. Bart said, "All I want you to do is to be nice to them when they come around the bar—savvy."

Hooper cursed slowly. "You can't frame me, O'Shea."

Spurred boots were running down the hallway. Jim Key showed up breathless.

"Two herds coming in," he said. "I didn't even have to go to the yards. One's the Key and the other—"

He ran out of wind.

Bart stood up, and the gun that had been resting in his lap clattered to the floor. Brick



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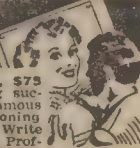
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Hooper dove for it. He got to it before Bart could seem to reach the gun and rolled over onto his back and shot point-blank for Bart's stomach. Then Hooper's face went so white the freckles stood out as if they had been cut from colored paper and pasted onto his skin. The hammer had hit an empty shell.

"I took out the load," Bart said. "I just had to be sure you were in this with Gramp and the Hungry Kid. I was pretty slow catchin' on, Brick. Maybe I never would have if you hadn't mutinied."

"You can't prove anything."

"You tried to kill me," Bart said. "You've done plenty—and your two shifty partners will be glad to talk after a little persuasion. Maybe you'd rather beat them to it."

"What do I get out of it?" Brick Hooper asked.

Bart shrugged. "I need a man to open your safe so the Gold Star outfit can pay for my beef. After that—" He shrugged. "To quote the marshal, Brick—nobody's sworn out any warrant to hold you. Besides he did not really deputize me."

Brick was chewing his lower lip. "Okay," he said. "They offered me a fifty-fifty split. This was after you broke my wrist. I was sore—and twenty thousand is a lot of dinero. They figured with the Indian scare the herds could be picked up easily. With you and Key in jail they could peddle it quick. Hannagan and Combes already think you and Key are pardners to Gramp and Hungry. All I had to do was lend a hand to make it look legal—and open the safe."

Jim Key began cussing in an amazed undertone.

Bart said, "I ought to kill you, Brick, but I made a deal. See to it you don't try to wriggle out of it."

Then he took the revolver from Hooper and left the room. Jim Key followed.

BART O'SHEA and Jim Key went down to the barroom and took chairs in the dimmest corner. Bart rolled a cigarette, ordered a bottle and cards.

Most of the cattle buyers had gone along with the posse, since it was their opinion that no herds would come in during the Indian scare. Only the wily Ezra Combes and Adam Hannagan were hanging around the Million Dollar Bar that afternoon and they had gone out when Bart and Jim Key came in to start their card game. After a while Brick Hooper came down. Half an hour later the boy from the telegraph office rushed in.

"Hey, Brick," he shouted. "Beef is up to fifty, F.O.B., Chicago. They're takin' anything."

POWDERSMOKE PARDNERS

The kid left. Brick wiped the slate and put down the new figure.

"I never seen nothing like that," he said to Gus in awe. He started to turn to repeat the comment when four men came into the saloon, chatting amiably. Brick Hooper jerked a thumb at the blackboard.

"Look at that!" he shouted.

The four men halted just inside the door. Bart, with his back to them, could follow their movements only through sound. He heard them go ahead to the bar. Gramp was talking in his enthusiastic treble.

"Hot diggity, Sonny Boy," he said. "Looks like we made a real killin' for our pardner. Too bad he ain't here right now to enjoy it."

The Hungry Kid only grunted. To Gus he said, "It's after five. Where in hell is the free lunch?"

"There ain't any," Gus said. "The cook's chasin' Injuns, and—"

Adam Hannagan cut in with his wheedling voice, "Now look, mister. We told your boss we'd pay forty bucks a head. At the time beef was selling for only thirty-two. We were willing to take the chance. Now we ain't—"

Gramp said softly, "Down at the yards you and me agreed to the quoted price, Mr. Hannagan, less ten per cent for handling the deal. If you'd ruther—"

Behind the bar Brick Hooper suddenly and surprisingly added his bit, "You want the story to go around you welched on an agreement, Adam?" he asked.

"No," Hannagan griped, "but—well—okay, Brick, get out the dinero. Only thing bothers me is that the boss ain't here. I know he as much as said he was pardner to these gents down to the Dine-a-Mite the other night. But if he was here—"

"The hell with him," The Hungry Kid said. "Let's go get something to eat, Pappy, and peddle the beef to somebody else."

"I'm takin' it," Hannagan said quickly. "Market price less ten per cent."

"Then hurry up," Gramp said. "And a bottle of the best, Gus. We'll all have a drink. You too, boys," he said.

That last was for Bart and Jim who were playing Casino with their hats tipped low over their eyes, and they got up. Only Gramp, of the four, recognized them immediately because he was looking at them, and Gramp's smile was wide and innocent.

"If it ain't the boss," he said cheerfully. "Why, by gosh, bud, we didn't expect you back from the war so soon."

"Reckon you didn't," Bart said, while the easy smile of the old-timer made him feel as if he was walking on the knife-edge of a hundred-foot fence. He would never forget the



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

last two times he had met up with old Gramp.

The Hungry Kid turned to grin at Bart and Jim. "If it ain't Mr. Key with him," he said enthusiastically. "Hyah, Mr. Key. The saw-bones ever come for that poor pair of hurt buffalo hunters?"

Jim Key was nonplussed. Brick Hooper quit piling money on the bar and Adam Hannagan began looking as if he was preparing for a trade.

"It was forty bucks a head, wasn't it, Mister O'Shea—" he started.

At that instant Gramp produced a pistol. He got it so quickly it looked as if he had held it all the time.

"This skinflint trying to rob you, bud?" he asked Bart. "Well—damn him—he won't. Tried to welch on his trade, too. Count out that money, Sonny Boy."

The Hungry Kid went to work. Gramp's gun had everyone there covered. The Hungry Kid stacked the money and stuffed it into a beer pitcher. He made a great pretence of counting out ten percent for the buyers. When he was through he started to back slowly toward the door. Gramp was grinning easily.

"Maybe you better hold these crooks, Bud," he suggested to Bart, "until we get away. We'll meet you at the you-know-where."

Bart O'Shea's spine was crawley, and he remembered how the marshal had said everything comes in three's. Well, this was the third time—and he was still holding the bag. But he remembered how three was a lucky number, too, and when Gramp had to move from the bar to let the Hungry Kid cross behind him Bart reached for his gun.

The iron cleared leather as Gramp's first shot chewed his holster to bits. He bounced lead off Gramp's Colt, making Gramp drop it. Gramp howled, "Don't do that, bud," and Bart turned from him to the Kid.

He put a bullet right through the beer pitcher the Hungry Kid was carrying on a run toward the door. Money and glass scattered all over the place. Gramp grabbed for his pistol but found it useless—and Brick Hooper reached for the sawed-off shotgun behind the bar.

Shooting with his left hand he was not very accurate. Some buckshot got Bart in the shoulder and knocked him wheeling into the poker tables, where he spilled into a mass of wreckage. Brick was trying to make it look like an accident, but he was a little too cagey and clumsy. Jim Key got going, to bounce a bullet off the bar. Bart managed to get his gun up and killed the saloonman with a bullet that broke his neck.

Gramp and the Hungry Kid had gotten away. Their poor crow-bait horses were rush-

POWDERSMOKE PARDNERS

ing down Railroad Avenue. But the beef money was scattered all over the floor like leaves in a cottonwood grove. Gramp had stopped only long enough to grab the bottle Gus had set on the bar—and it was one bottle Bart would gladly pay for.

THE posse came back in dribbles, discouraged and disgusted because the Indians, it seemed, had not split into two groups. They had gone straight north with the cavalry on their tail and, as far as anyone knew, they were still running.

And over in the Dine-a-Mite Café four people sat down to the best steaks the house could offer. They had a bottle of burgundy on the table and a bottle of the best from the Million Dollar Bar, compliments of Gus.

The marshal said, "Tomorrow someone else will figure out some other kind of hell raising. Tomorrow I'll have to slap some more boys into jail."

"I'm glad it won't be any of us, Marshal," Dallas Key said, and she looked upon Bart O'Shea with a soft glow in her blue eyes. "Tomorrow we'll be on our way back to Texas. We sold our herd. Jim and Bart are going to be pardners."

"Toast!" Jim said.

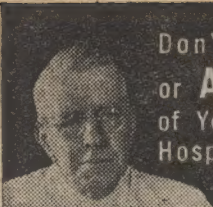
They filled their glasses and held them high. As they clicked them together Adam Hannagan and his little pardner, Ez Combes rushed in.

"I been robbed!" Hannagan shouted. "The army's letting beef come up the trail again. Half a dozen herds are coming in. Beef's down to twenty-two. Your pardners paid that kid to say the quote was fifty. You got to—"

"Beat it," the marshal said. "You're makin' too much noise."

Bart thought how Hannagan and Combes had tried to cheat him, too, and he clicked his glass again.

"To our benefactors," he toasted. "May their trail be long."



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